





The Little Gate Openers.

DOUGLASS FARM;

A Juvenile Story of Life in Virginia.

BY

MARY E. BRADLEY.

EDITED BY

“COUSIN ALICE.”

“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”—Rom. xii. 21.

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TO MY SISTER

"SUE,"

THIS SIMPLE STORY,

WHOSE INSPIRATION SHE WILL RECOGNIZE,

As inscribed by

M. E. N. B.

A GREETING FROM "COUSIN ALICE."

THERE is no "Home Book" for Christmas and New Year's Day; but, instead of a "proverbial tale," Cousin Alice greets you with one that she has read and approved, and commends to all who have her own volumes on their book-shelves.

In her Christmas story four years ago—a long time for little people to remember,—she promised some day to give a description of the Old Virginia Homestead in which it was written. That was in the introduction to "Patient Waiting no Loss,"—which will prove true in this instance; for the story of Douglass Farm describes these very scenes—the old Hall, the lawn, the avenue, the chubby little negro children who ran to open the carriage gate in our drives, the "Aunties" and "Uncles" of the large kitchen department,—the bountiful Christmas cheer, and the little people for whom it was made ready. All this is described by the young hostess who welcomed her to "Margret Hall,"—and far better than Cousin Alice would have been able to, inasmuch as it was her birthplace and childhood's home.

More than this, you will find, in the history of a year at Douglass Farm a lesson of patient "continuance in well doing,"—of filial obedience and sisterly

love,—of the tender respect and care the aged justly claim from us, and a pure unselfishness in the character of Miriam, worthy of all imitation.

Happy to send you through so pleasant a messenger her glad yearly greeting, and hoping the next will be a tale from her own pen to those she has learned to love as her young readers and friends, accept the best wishes of

COUSIN ALICE.

LOCUST COTTAGE, 1856.

DOUGLASS FARM :

A HOUSEHOLD STORY.

CHAPTER I.

It was New-Year's eve, and Miriam Douglass was sitting alone in one of the deep windows of the broad old hall that divided equally the ample homestead of Douglass farm. In summer time, this hall, pierced with many doors and windows, and opening at each end upon a long, shady piazza whose draperies of honeysuckle and cluster roses sent perpetual wafts of fragrance through it, was the pleasantest place in the house. But in this chilly winter evening, with the shadows lying thickly around, and the frosty air finding entrance through many a chink and crevice, a seat in the great curtainless window, looking out into murkiness and gloom, was not very inviting.

Miriam's feet were gathered up under the

folds of her black dress, and her dark hair drooping over her face, hid it so, as she sat in her crouching attitude, that you scarce distinguished her from the mass of shadows around. Her hands were folded over her knees, and her head bent upon them in a sort of hopeless dreamy way, that told unconsciously the character of the young girl's reverie. The burden of human care and sorrow, and responsibility had fallen early upon her, and her heart was full of sad memories, bitter anticipations, and weary yearnings for rest, and comfort and guidance.

"If I only knew what to do, or how to help it all;" she murmured half aloud; "but I am too young, and too weak, and too ignorant for any such responsibility. And I have tried too, so hard—but it is no use, I might as well give up trying. What can I do? Oh mother, why did God take you from us when we all needed you so much!"

She leaned her face against the window-pane, and strained her eyes into the darkness without. She knew it was not visible, that which she looked for, yet with inward vision she saw the white gleam of the marble over her mother's grave, and the great pine boughs tossing in the wind. Only four months ago that grave had been made in the family burial-ground, the first time that its sods had been broken since Miriam could remember.



The Dark Hour.

The tombstones were moss-grown, and bore date of years before her birth; not even a baby sister or brother had found resting-place, there, to teach her heart somewhat of the great universal sorrow of humanity. And so her first knowledge of death had come to her in the bitterest shape. Her mother—the light and brightness of the household, who bore all its burdens, who scattered all its cares, who bound all together by her own strong love, and shed over all hearts the warmth and gladness of her own sunny beautiful spirit, had been taken away almost without a warning, and from the head of the household to its youngest and least member, all were left desolate. A few days of delirious pain, a long night of speechless agony, when only the dear eyes could turn from one to another with their last utterance of love, and the lips could frame not even one dying message—and then there was nothing left but a fair, beautiful body, round whose lifelessness and silence, husband and children, and servants and friends, wept in wild passionate woe.

Miriam recalled it all, as with wistful eyes she looked out into the darkness towards the graveyard. Four months since, her mother had been borne a silent weight through the long hall over whose floor her light feet had sprung so often, through the piazza, whose roses and honeysuckles had been trained by her own fin-

gers out into the shady graveyard, under whose pines and cedars she had sat with her children round her, full of gladness and life, so many summer days. That one tall pine which overtopped all the others, had been her special pride and admiration; and Miriam could not count the times that her mother had sat in its shade, telling her stories maybe of the Douglass ancestors, who lay around them beneath those mossed and crumbling tombstones. It was there, at the foot of that very pine, that the new grave had been made; and the wind surging through those thick boughs sang its solemn song for her now, whose dull ears should never listen to it again.

Four months: it was the last of the summer then, and now autumn had faded into winter, and the close of the year was come. Christmas had passed drearily and joylessly, so different from every other year that Miriam could remember. There had always been such Christmas merry-making; gifts for the children and the negroes; such wonderful Christmas pies, and bountiful Christmas tables; the house garnished with myrtle, and cedar, and holly boughs; and guests coming and going with interchange of blithe and loving greeting. It had been so different this time: there was no "merry Christmas" spoken in the house, the little ones were checked and awed into silence by

their father's stern and gloomy brow, and even the negroes scarcely kept their own holiday. Instead of a season of joy and festivity, it had been one of heaviness and gloom at Douglass Farm; and worse still, instead of a day of "peace on earth, good-will to men," that Christmas day had been darkened by the saddest scene of bitterness and harshness and anger that Miriam's young eyes had ever witnessed.

Her head drooped again as she thought of it, and for a moment a feeling of thankfulness arose in her heart that her mother had not been left to know the bitter pain of this strife and contention between her husband and her first-born son. "But it would never have been if she had not been taken away," came the murmuring thought directly. "There was no trouble in the house when she was here, and now there is perpetual complaining and disagreement, and harshness and rebellion. Father is so hard and stern, and Lawrence is so wilful and passionate; and the little ones quarrel amongst themselves, and the household is in confusion half the time. And I—what can I do? how can I bring order out of this chaos, peace out of such tumult?"

It might have seemed a hopeless task to one older and of a more resolute spirit than Miriam. She was very young, only fourteen, when her mother died; and naturally timid and shrinking in disposition. Her love was earnest, but her

faith weak and fearful, and she had no confidence in her own powers, no appreciation of her own efforts. Prone always to yield to depression, rather than to struggle against it; to sink down in humiliation and self-reproach beneath her burdens, instead of rising up hopefully to put forth new strength for its endurance; it was little wonder that her weak heart sent out its cry of despair beneath such a weight of trial and sorrow and perplexity, as oppressed it now.

All alone—as far as human counsel or sympathy were concerned—she stood in her religious faith. She had never even spoken to her mother so passionately loved, of the new and thrilling hope that had sprung up in her soul. In sensitive timidity she had kept it hidden in her heart, only striving to conform her outer life by the inward light granted her, until her mother died: then when this hope and trust were her only solace and strength, to endure a grief which without them had been all despair; she longed to tell her father, wrapped up in his stern and gloomy sorrow, where *she* had found comfort and support, and entreat him that he might seek it for himself. But she had never dared. She had been alone with him many times when she had longed to seat herself at his feet, and lay her head upon his knee, and tell him so every thought and feeling of her heart.

But she never could come near to him, her own father though he was. One glance at the stern brow from which the dark shadow was never lifted, at the firmly set lips with their expression of proud endurance—lips from which no tender and softening word had come since her mother died—and every impulse to approach him shrank frightened from Miriam's heart. So she would sit with him, but apart from him, silent and sad, not daring to offer sympathy or companionship; while he brooded alone over his rebellious and unchastened sorrow.

He had never been like her mother; Miriam ever remembered him as to a degree stern and undemonstrative, and the children had always a certain awe of him never felt towards her; yet he had been kind and affectionate, too indulgent even at times, and there was rarely any household trouble so long as she was with them. But every thing had changed since, and in those four months there had been more fault-finding, more harshness and anger, more strife and contention at Douglass Farm than in all the fourteen years of Miriam's life before. Their great common sorrow, instead of softening the father's heart to pitying tenderness for his children, seemed only to make him more harsh and severe with them; more impatient of every childish fault, more rigorous in the withholding of childish indulgences. He shut himself up in

his own morbid grief, and had little communion with his children except to blame or reprove; and that often for trifling misdemeanors by no means proportionate to the severity of the rebuke.

It is true that Miriam but seldom incurred his displeasure; for she was so humble and patient, so dutiful and submissive, and strove so meekly to fulfil the household duties and responsibilities that devolved upon her, that he could not often find fault with her: but the younger children, away from the influence of the gentle yet firm hand which had guided them so carefully, were constantly getting into disgrace and trouble, spite of all her efforts to keep them in proper bounds. And many a night she had lingered by the little beds, trying to soothe and comfort the little childish sorrow called forth by some punishment, which in the depths of her troubled heart she could not but feel as a harsh and unnecessary thing.

And even this, hard as it was to bear, was not the worst. The bitterest trouble of her life, and the one for which she could find no consolation, was the perpetual strife between her father and Lawrence her older brother. He was but a year older than herself; yet while Miriam was precocious and womanly much beyond her years, Lawrence as a boy was even more so; and at fifteen was a man already, proud, reso-

lute, and self-willed. He had all his father's strength of character and determined purpose, and with this sense of power, he rebelled against any imposed restraint, and boldly disregarded the sovereignty of his father's authority. Hence there was continued discord between them, a stern command on one side, and obstinate rebellion on the other, excited by trifles of everyday occurrence. The worst outbreak had taken place on Christmas day, when Lawrence had asked permission to spend the day at "Hollybrook" with Roger Dennis, a companion of his own age. The request was a mere matter of form with Lawrence, for he had made the engagement with his friend a week ago; and his surprise almost equalled his indignation when he received a decided refusal.

"*Why* may I not go, sir?" he asked, with a vain effort to steady the passionate trembling of his voice.

"Because I have forbidden it, sir, which is an all-sufficient reason," was his father's cold reply. And Lawrence retorted furiously,

"It is a sufficient reason for a slave or a baby, perhaps, but one that *I* will neither accept nor submit to!"

So he hurried out of the house, saddled his horse with his own hands, and rode away in open defiance of his father's prohibition. He came back at nightfall, and walked boldly into

the sitting-room where he knew that Mr. Douglass was, neither fearing nor caring for the reception that he was likely to meet. A bitter reception it was, and the scene that took place I will not attempt to describe. The children clustered around Miriam, frightened and trembling at the loud tones, and angry, threatening words ; and Miriam bowed her head and hid her face in an agony of the deepest shame and sorrow that she had ever known. In this room, once such a bright and cheery household room, where still stood her mother's chair, her mother's work-table, and many a little token besides of the presence that had been its sunshine in former times ; where, if in any place, her mother's spirit should linger—that such a scene should be witnessed—and on this day of all others ! One little year ago the room had echoed to such glad voices, with not one note out of tune—oh, the harsh discords that jarred through it now !

Over all this dreary ground Miriam's thoughts wandered. There was no light or comfort in the retrospect, and to her weak faith there seemed no promise of hope for the future. Very drooping, very hopeless and sad sat the child, with the darkness folded close about her, the great hall a sea of blackness before her, and without the graveyard pines swaying in the

wind, heard but not seen. It was the time of her temptation, for in this sense of utter weariness and helplessness came the almost irresistible impulse to give up every thing—faith, hope, prayer—and drift with the tide which she had no power to stem.

But trembling and frightened, she shrank back, as suddenly the extent of the great temptation flashed over her; and quickly, in answer to her eager cry for help and strength to resist it, these words came gliding into her mind—

“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

“Endure unto the end—endure unto the end.”

And with the words a great flood of light and comfort seemed poured into the child's heart: the sullen tears that unshed had weighed down her eyelids, fell in a sudden shower now of hope and thankfulness, and the head bent down upon the folded hands drooped no longer in helpless despair, but in fervent, eager, trustful prayer. The night was as dark around her as before, she could not see one step forward; yet the voice before her saying, “It is I, be not afraid—follow me”—her ears could hear now. So, humbly but with new courage, she arose to tread the unseen path which the New-Year should open for her.

CHAPTER II.

"MINNIE! sister!" a child's troubled voice, half frightened, half fretful, reached Miriam's ear, sounding from the farther end of the great hall. She started up quickly, answering,

"Is that you, Pussie? Where are you?"

"Where are *you*?" asked the little voice. "Oh, now I know!" and then there was a sudden rush of little feet through the darkness, and the child sprang breathless into the arms opened wide to receive her.

"What makes you stay in the dark, all alone?" she exclaimed pettishly, nestling down upon her sister's shoulder. "I hunted for you every where, and didn't you know I wanted you?"

"I left you in Grandma's room, Pussie, so I didn't think of your wanting me," Miriam answered, as, carrying the child in her arms, she walked towards the sitting-room.

"Well, but I got tired of staying there; Grandma was cross"—

"Hu—sh, Pussie!" Miriam's finger touched the little girl's lip reprovingly; but Pussie kept on boldly:

"So she was, Minnie, ask Horace now! for she wanted us to sit right still, and wouldn't let us play a bit. So we came away, and then Horace wanted to read with Mabel, and I had nobody to take care of me. Then I went to look for you."

"Well, now you've found me," Miriam said pleasantly, setting the little girl down as she opened the door of the sitting-room. There were no lamps lighted, but the large room was all in a glow from a famous oak-wood fire, burning within the ample fireplace. The flame was reflected in the broad hearth of polished black marble, and glittered and flashed over the shining surface of the brass fender, and huge brass andirons that upheld those sturdy oak-logs. The whole room, with its three large windows draped with dark chintz curtains, its soft, bright-colored carpet, its heavy old-fashioned mahogany furniture, its high-backed leather arm-chairs, and cosy, crimson-covered round table on which stood the shaded lamp—lay warm and cheery in the bright blaze of this generous fire. There could not be a greater contrast than between it and the chilly darkness of the hall-window; and Miriam's heart in its new hopefulness acknowledged gratefully the

comfort and pleasantness that still lingered in her home.

This was the family room, arranged in all its cheerful and homelike details by her mother's own plan. There was a parlor on the other side of the hall, that had the grand old furniture in it, and the stately portraits of the ancient Douglasses, and the century old cabinets of minerals and stuffed birds. The negroes on the farm, who only had glimpses of it on high-days and holidays, thought it a most gorgeous and wonderful room ; but it had not the grace and brightness of the sitting-room, where nothing was grand, but every thing pretty and useful. In the parlor her mother had rested last : the slight shrouded figure, with its delicate hands clasping roses white as themselves, and pure face so beautiful in its marble stillness, had lain there two summer days ; and from there had been borne away to the grave beneath the great pine. The room had never been used since, and the children saw always in the midst of its stately stillness, their dead mother, as she had lain there in her coffin through those summer days. But in the sitting-room, where she had dwelt with them day by day, and where they had clustered round her in glad household union and love, she seemed still a living presence with them. When their father was away, that is : for when he came in amongst them, it was

strange and sad to see what a shadow fell over them at once, and how keenly they missed the presence which before they had almost fancied in their midst.

But to-night he was not here. Only two children, a boy and a girl, of exactly the same height and wonderfully like each other, sat together on the hearth-rug, reading by the fire-light from off the same book. And at a little distance apart from them, just before the hottest blaze of the fire, knelt two little negro girls, upon whose shining black faces and arms it seemed to make no more impression than it did upon the marble hearth. As silent and absorbed as the readers themselves, were these two little sable handmaidens, with their round bright eyes winking and shutting sleepily, and their heads nodding to and fro. It was quite a picture, the little group; but Pussie sprang in and put life into it in a very little while.

First to the little negroes: "Wake up, you Lily! Geranium, don't you hear?" with such peremptory emphasis, that the little damsels of the flowery appellations sprang to their feet broad awake in a minute, and smiling from ear to ear.

Then to her brother and sister: "There!" with a snatch at the engrossing book—"Minnie says you're not to read any more, don't you, Minnie? So just put the old book down now, and play."

But Mabel held the book tightly, and Horace said impatiently, "Who cares for Minnie? She didn't say so, besides. So be still, Pussie, and don't bother us. You hear?"

"Who cares for Minnie!" Miriam repeated pleasantly, stooping down to the children. "Why Horace does, of course, and if Minnie says put the book down till after supper, he will do it for her. Won't he, little May?"

Little May looked up brightly into her sister's face, ready to make a bargain. "Yes, if you'll tell us a story," she said. But Pussie interrupted impetuously, "No, *no*! Let's play puss in the corner. Papa hasn't come yet, so we can have a nice time; and we *never* play any games nowadays."

"Puss in the corner's only fit for babies," said Horace contemptuously. At which Pussie began a remonstrance. But Miriam hushed it up, and made a compromise for all by opening the piano to play for them. It was so rarely opened nowadays—for Mr. Douglass could never bear to hear it since his wife's death—that the music was quite a treat to the children, and they all gathered eagerly around Miriam. And Lily and Geranium were stationed at the window to watch "for mas'r's gig," and give the first signal of his arrival; so that the piano might be closed before he was annoyed by the sound.

Now while Miriam is playing, and the little ones too much engrossed to be conscious of any personal remarks, we will give you a more formal introduction to the young people at Douglass Farm. Pussie comes first, as in her own estimation at least, she is an important member of the family. Her true name is Kitty, or to go back to the family Bible, Catharine Amelia Douglass; and this is the title which she always gives to any stranger asking her name. But she is such a little round thing, so saucy and frolicsome and topsy-turvy, so kitten-like in her general aspect and behavior, that her long name sees very little every-day service, and "Pussie" has been always the household call for the household pet. She is five years old, and the youngest, Miriam's special charge and care. For Miriam read in the pleading look which her dying mother turned from her to the sobbing, frightened child, that the little one was left as a sacred trust to her. And very sacredly Miriam had held it, praying that she might act a motherly part, wise and thoughtful and tender, towards the wayward petted little one. Pussie thinks that "Minnie" belongs to her quite as entirely as her little bond maidens, Lily and Geranium; and she orders her about hither and thither, making her subject to her whimsical will in a very "little princess" style. But Miriam suffers it smilingly, for in all essential

matters, Pussie is a good and obedient child; loving her sister with all her heart, and yielding prompt submission whenever it is required.

Horace and Mabel—or Little May, as Laurence always calls her—make much more trouble for Miriam. They are the twins, and in their nine-year-old dignity, do not choose always to be governed by their sister, who as May, a self-willed little rebel, says, “is only fourteen, and just a head taller than me;” Horace, being a boy, has his own ideas of superiority of course; so it happens that the twins, through disregard of Miriam’s advice, come under their father’s displeasure far too often for Miriam’s peace of mind.

Lily, and Geranium-Flower, are twins too; several years older than Pussie, though Pussie claims them as her own peculiar playmates and waiting-maids. They trot after her all day long, the pair of them, for you never see them apart. If you did, you would never know which was Lily, or which Geranium; for they are both just so black and just so small, with the same round woolly heads, and the same saucy, twinkling black eyes, and wide mouths forever on the grin; which display rows of whiter and more regular teeth than Miss Pussie, who has been too much indulged in sweet things, can show. Pussie has a way of distinguishing them though, which she fancies very original.

She has sewed with her own little hands, a red ribbon bow upon the shoulder of Geranium's linsey frock; a badge of which Geranium is very proud indeed, and Lily not a little envious. In general, however, the dark little sisters are very good friends, and perfectly united in their devotion to Miss Pussie. They are useful little messengers for the whole house besides, and run upon perpetual errands for parlor and kitchen alike. For Aunt Comfort, who is "Granny" to them, their mother being dead long ago, keeps a strict hand over them, and by way of seeing that they are "wuth their vittles" as she says, manages to make them save her a great many steps.

Aunt Comfort is the house-keeper at Douglass Farm. She has nursed every one of the children as she nursed their mother before them, and in her dignified position, impresses all the negroes upon the place with a wonderful sense of her importance. She wears a most miraculous turban, and always has her gowns made with the biggest bishop-sleeves; which, as she is sufficiently portly without them, give such ample breadth to her figure, as could only be accommodated in the wide doors and halls of this roomy old house. Miriam keeps the key-basket and is the mistress, but Aunt Comfort bears the real burden of the house-keeping, the "sponsibility," as she often says. She su-

perintends the great Christmas slaughterings with all their concomitants of "fat-trying," sausage-chopping, soap-making, and cutting up into shoulders and jowls and chines and mid-dlings: she looks to the spinning and weaving, and cuts out all the garments, of which such a pile is made yearly for the numerous "hands" upon the farm: she has charge of the smoke-house, and the poultry-yard, and the dairy; and portions out to the field-negroes their daily rations of meat and meal and molasses. She directs Aunt Sabra the cook, too, in the matter of breakfasts and dinners for "Marster," and takes upon herself the making of all the delicate pastry and rich cake, and "company" deserts.

A very busy and very self-important individual is Aunt Comfort, though most faithful and kind-hearted too, and with all her soul devoted to the interests and well-being of the family. Miss Minnie is her great pride and admiration, nevertheless she doesn't allow much interference of Miss Minnie's in any of her departments. If Miriam, seeking as house-mistress a general supervision of all the labors going on, offers her assistance in any, Aunt Comfort sends her off, with—

"Now, Miss Minnie, jes' you clar out, honey, and let me ten' to dis bisness by myself. I'ze plenty capable, and you ain't no sort o' good

yer, so you'd a heap better be lookin' arter dem chillun. Lord bless you, dey allas wants seein' to, some of 'em. Leave 'em alone one minnit, and 'pen' upon it, dey gits into some kin' o' mischieviousness. Den you know, Miss Minnie, marster has to git 'em out of it, and you ain't so mighty well sot up wid his way, no how."

Aunt Comfort knew the strength of her argument, for this view of the case generally impressed Miriam, so that she left Aunt Comfort to her own devices, and went back to the charge which she felt in truth her own more especial duty. It was true enough that the children always wanted "looking after." About the house as they were all day, for they did not go to school, and with no regular study hours for the lessons which their father heard them recite every afternoon, they were continually getting up some sort of a nursery riot. Then the lessons which they could learn "any time" were neglected and put off from hour to hour, especially by those rebellious ones, Horace and Mabel. Until their father's summons to say them found them all unprepared and in trouble and fear they would go down to meet the punishment which only too often awaited them.

These lessons made a world of trouble for the twins. They were long enough and hard enough in their way of Greek and Latin, and History and Geography and Arithmetic, to em

ploy fully the most of their morning hours. But they would waste away the morning with some trifle, disregarding Miriam's frequent warnings; then when frightened suddenly by a discovery of the lateness of the hour, they would go to work very hard indeed to accomplish a great deal in a little while. But it often happened that the recitation of the tasks thus hurried over, ended in tears and woful disgrace. Many a night found the children supperless in bed long before bed-time; many a bright afternoon looked in upon them shut up in papa's study, to con again those hopeless crabbed Greek verbs, and puzzle over the construction of those involved Latin sentences; while smarting hands and tingling ears too, bore evidence sometimes of harsher discipline still. For Mr. Douglass was more severe in the matter of the lessons than in any thing else. He had his own ideas of education, of which he considered Latin and Greek the only solid foundation. There was no discipline like it for the mind, he said; so as soon as his children had mastered the spelling-book, their young minds were disciplined with Latin grammar. "Milk for babes" Mr. Douglass was apt to forget, and he expected them to digest the strong meat which he set before them as if they had been men. So the struggle with the Latin and Greek had always been a hard one, the progress a very weary

up-hill sort of advance, every step of which had been marked by tears ; even when their mother was living. She had smoothed it for them as much as possible by making them observe a certain system and order in their studying ; but since her death Miriam had not the same authority, and as the study hours came to be spread all over the day, so the lessons came to be neglected, and then constant trouble and punishment was the consequence.

Miriam had her own tasks too, for Mr. Douglass taught them all, and was himself preparing Laurence for the University. There was no school in the county which he considered suitable for his children, and instead of employing tutor or governess, he chose to be their teacher himself. But Miriam often wished that it could be otherwise. She tried to be faithful and conscientious in the discharge of her own duty, even though the studies to which she was confined were difficult and uninteresting, and her father's style of instruction was not such as to inspire her with love for them. But the children's troubles often made her wish that they could go to school ; and Laurence was even more discontented than they. Mr. Douglass required almost impossible promptitude, diligence, and progress from him, and Laurence rebelling against his exactions, was purposely careless and indifferent often. Of late there

were few days when the boy did not come from his father's study angry and excited, with new fuel added to the fire of his discontent.

He had looked forward eagerly to the close of this year as the last of his home-teaching. For though it had never been directly promised, he had been led to expect that in the coming New Year his collegiate course should begin ; and he had waited for it with restless impatience, and feverish longing to escape from the home which since his mother's death had grown a hateful prison to the proud and wilful boy. Miriam had looked for it too as an unspeakable relief, dearly as she loved her brother, and much as she needed his companionship. But on that unhappy Christmas day, Mr. Douglass in his angry displeasure with Laurence had revoked his decision, and as a punishment condemned him to remain at home for another whole year. He knew how great the disappointment would be to the boy, and that a bitterer punishment could not have been inflicted.

One piece after another Miriam played for the eager children, who had not heard the piano in a week before. She enjoyed it herself too, strangely, for the music that sprang to sound beneath her own light touches, seemed to blend with the voices of hope in her heart, making a gayer melody there than it had listened to of late. So she played away cheerily whatever

the children called for, and sang to them, too, with her sweet girlish voice, that in its shyness would never let itself be heard, except before such an audience. She was in the midst of a grand march, to which Pussie was keeping time by strutting up and down the room with great dignity of gait, when Lily and Geranium gave at last the signal of Mas'r's approach. The grand march was cut short, and the piano closed quickly. Horace and Mabel settled themselves to the beloved book again, but Pussie ran to the window impatiently, to see for herself if it were really her father.

"I don't see any body, Geranium—what do you tell wrong stories for?" she said, flattening her nose against the pane, in a vain effort to peer through the darkness.

Geranium giggled: "I spec' you don' see nothin', Miss Pussie; you ain't gwine to, nother. De hoss clean gon roun' de house a'ready—de way *dat* hoss gits up!"

"Get papa's slippers for him, Pussie;" said Miriam, who was busy lighting the globe-lamp upon the centre-table. But while Pussie ran off for the slippers, the door opened, and instead of Mr. Douglass, a tall, somewhat slender boy, with brilliant dark eyes, and a wavy mass of curly hair clustering over a girlishly white forehead, made his appearance.

"Oh, it is Laurence!" cried little May,

jumping up from her book. "Where have you been, Laurie, and where's papa?"

"What business is that of yours?" Laurence answered good-humoredly, for little May was a great favorite with her tall brother. "Run out and tell Aunt Comfort to let us have supper right away. Papa isn't coming home."

"I'll go, Miss May, I'll tell her!" Lily and Geranium cried in a breath, while Pussie paused irresolute with the slippers which she was about to lay upon the hearth-rug, and Mabel asked eagerly, "Isn't he really coming? How do you know, Laurie?"

"Because I was riding through Pungoteague, and saw him at Kellam's," Laurence answered. "And he told me to take home word that he should not be back till late, as he was to meet a gentleman on business. It's just possible that he may not come at all to-night, Miriam; it is a long ride, and he will have to be out early to-morrow. New Year's Day, you know."

"Yes, to be sure; and what do you think, Laurie?" broke in Pussie. "Lily and Geranium want to go up to Pungoteague to-morrow with Aunt Comfort and Big Jim, and all the rest of the people! Did you ever hear any thing so foolish?"

"Never in my life!" Laurence exclaimed

laughing, as he looked down upon the dusky twins, who had delivered their message and trotted back again, and were now listening eagerly for "Mas' Laurie's" opinion of their ambitious desire. "Why, such pickaninnies as you would be run over in the twinkling of an eye at Pungoteague to-morrow, and they'd never stop to pick you up! They'd trample you into such little bits, Aunt Comfort would never be able to find the pieces! Or if they didn't do that, they'd tie your hands behind you and send you down to Georgia to pick cotton with your toes! No, indeed, Pungoteague isn't the place for such mice as you, New Year's Day!"

The round black eyes were stretched to their widest extent with terror, showing a vast expanse of white, as Lily and Geranium listened in silent horror. "Mas' Laurie's" words were solemn truth to them, and even Pussie looked a little frightened as she said warningly, "There—didn't I tell you how foolish you were to want to go?"

Miriam laughed, and said, "What nonsense, Laurie!" as she put her arm through his and led the way into the supper-room. It was a pleasant thing to see him so bright and cheerful as he was to-night; he was more like the gay, handsome, loving brother that he used to be of old than he had been since Christ-

mas Day. And Miriam enjoyed all his merry speeches, and his fun with the children very heartily. They had a pleasanter supper than any of them had had in a long while. In general, the meal-times passed in a very dull and silent way; Mr. Douglass had little or nothing to say, and the children only spoke under their breath. It was always a relief to Miriam when the breakfast or dinner or supper was fairly over. But to-night, unrestrained by their father's presence, the little tongues kept up a lively chatter, which Laurence provoked and encouraged by his good-natured bantering. They lingered over the table a long time in pleasant talk, and Aunt Comfort looked on with dignified satisfaction to see "dem chillun 'joyin' demselves. Dat was de way things *used* to be," she remarked to Aunt Sabra as she stood washing up the dishes, when they had left the table at last. "When mistis was a livin', and de chillun warn't afeard to say deir souls was deir own. Nowadays dey isn't one of 'em—'thout it *is* Mas' Laurie, an' he ain't afeard o' de Ole Boy hisself, ef he was on the face o' the yeth—dat farly dars to open his mouth when Marster's by. But dat's no way to fotch up chillun, 'cordin' to my b'lief, nor de blessed Bible nother. 'Twan't Mistis's way, 'taint de right way—and Marster he'll fin' it out one o' dese days; you min', Comfort!"

So Aunt Comfort wound up with an oracular toss of her turban, which was answered sympathetically by Aunt Sabra, as she bore away the remains of the waffles and stewed oysters into the kitchen dominions. While Miriam, unconscious of these remarks, which, however, she heard often enough from Aunt Comfort, was seated in her father's arm-chair, with Pussie on her knee, Horace and Mabel on the rug at her feet, and Geranium and Lily hovering like shadows in the rear, all listening with hushed and solemn faces to a marvellous legend of the Old Year, partly handed down by family tradition, but very much embellished by Miriam's own imagination.

The story ended, Lily and Geranium trotted off to the kitchen for their supper. When they appeared again, Pussie, who had been basking in the firelight in a state of quietude very unusual for her, suddenly declared herself sleepy; and Miriam laid aside her work to go up stairs with her. She always went to hear her say her prayers, and give her the good-night kiss, without which Pussie never willingly went to sleep. Aunt Comfort went too, for she was Pussie's "mammy" still, and regularly dressed and undressed her; and the two little negroes went, for they were Pussie's body-guard by night as well as by day. They slept upon a "lodge" beside the bed, and went to sleep whenever she did.

Laurence laughed at the forming of the procession, and told Miriam to hurry down again, for he wanted to read aloud to her. So she came back as soon as she had seen Pussie in bed, and then Laurence read aloud the papers and magazines which he had brought from the post-office; while she sewed, and Horace and May amused themselves quietly, making paper toys, and listening to their brother whenever any thing like a story was read. They too grew sleepy by and by, however, and went off in search of Aunt Comfort to light them to bed, and Miriam was left alone with her brother.

"We have had a nice evening, Laurie," she said, as he laid aside the magazine at last, and sat looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"Yes," he answered drily. "It's a singular thing, isn't it, that a father's absence contributes so much to the enjoyment of his children?"

Miriam looked up with a reproachful "*I wish* you would not say such things, Laurie."

"As well say them as think them," he returned carelessly. "You know well enough, Miriam, how true they are. We've had a pleasant evening because he was not here to spoil it—because his absence lifted the shadow that his presence always throws. You think so as well as myself, only you are afraid to say it."

"I know it is not right to think so; and if it is true, it is more our fault than his, perhaps, Laurence."

"How? I am sure I cannot see what we have to do with his moods. We are never near enough to his thoughts to influence them in any way, except as we are before his eyes, and he is obliged to feel that we belong to him. A feeling that gives him very little satisfaction, as I believe."

"That is the very thing I mean, Laurie; that we think such things about him, and distrust his love for us, and so keep our hearts shut to him, until it is no wonder that he is harsh and stern and silent towards us."

"Is it *my* fault that my heart is shut to him?" Laurence asked excitedly. "Has he ever given me any encouragement to open it? I would love my father with such a love, and such a pride, if he would only let me! But you know at what a distance he keeps us all, and me in especial—how no effort of mine to please him ever *has* given him pleasure, and his delight seems to be to thwart, constrain, mortify, and disappoint me in every possible way. I do not say that I have not given him cause often enough for anger with me, but I do say that had he even displayed any sympathy or forbearance with me, ever shown any fatherly feeling for me, I would have been as loving and dutiful a

son as a father could desire. But he never has."

"Oh, Laurence, *never* is a hard word," Miriam exclaimed sorrowfully. "It was not always so, you know. While mother lived, you had no trouble with father, at least nothing such as has happened since; and he *did* love you then, and *does* love you still, I am sure!"

"He loved *mother*," said Laurence, "and for her sake he gave us a measure of interest or affection—something—to satisfy her. But now that she is gone, he has no longer any tenderness for us. We irritate him by continually reminding him of her, without any power to fill her place; and he proves it by his harsh and impatient treatment of us ever since her death."

He spoke quietly, without passion, and Miriam, standing by his side, could only hide her face upon his shoulder in silent grief, for she could not deny that she had felt the same thing. They stood together so for some minutes, without speaking. Miriam said, at last:

"We must try to love him then, without looking for encouragement or return yet. Because he is our father, because *she* loved him so dearly, and because the sorrow which we all feel, falls heaviest and bitterest on him. We must *try* to fill her place to him, to keep her spirit so present with us always that he shall

recognize it in us by and by—and be won by our likeness to her. I do believe, Laurie," she continued earnestly, "that if we watch and pray, and strive to act always as she would wish to have us if she were here—as God shows us is right—we shall be happy again by and by, and there will be peace and love amongst us once more."

"Then I wish I had your faith, Minnie," said Laurence, with a half smile. "I must confess that I cannot see any prospect of such a millennium."

"We must work for it," she answered; "it will not come while we stand idle—but by patient perseverance in well-doing."

"Those are little words to say, Minnie, but it is not so easy to fulfil their meaning in one's life."

"Unless God helps us," Miriam interrupted timidly. "In this way we can do any thing that is right by His help, Laurie, and He has promised us all the strength that we need, if we only ask for it."

She looked up into her brother's face as she spoke, though her cheek flushed with embarrassment; for it cost her a great effort even to speak in this way, and she half dreaded indifference, if not ridicule, from Laurence.

She met neither, however; he only bent down and kissed her quietly, then said good-

night, and left the room. Miriam stayed an hour after he had gone ; not waiting for her father, for it was too late now to expect his return ; but kneeling upon the hearth-rug, her face buried in the cushions of her father's arm-chair, while her whole heart went out in sorrowful, pleading prayer. If the spirit of peace that she had prayed for did not yet spread its wings over the troubled household, its sweet influence was at least shed into her heart. She arose from her knees strengthened and comforted, and that night her sleep was untroubled as a child's.

CHAPTER III.

THE household was astir at a very early hour the next morning, for New Year's Day in Accomac is the greatest holiday of all the year to the negroes, and all were eager to get an early start to Pungoteague. Aunt Comfort, dignified as she was in general, holding herself loftily above the interests of the other negroes, condescended to take part in their New Year's Day; and her turban was always the centre of attraction in the great double wagon that went with its load of gayly-dressed and merry people from Douglass Farm up to Pungoteague. She was in a state of special excitement to-day, because Big Jim, her youngest son, so called to distinguish him from half-a-dozen smaller Jims on the place, was going to be hired out for the first time.

Big Jim was very willing himself, he wanted to see more of the world, and was getting besides very impatient of the strict control which his mother exercised over him still. Aunt Comfort had no particular objection

either, but it added a new importance to her bustling preparations, and gave occasion for the use of a great many grand words, as she laid down the law to him with regard to his future behavior, when no longer under her guardianship. Big Jim's regard for his woolly locks, just now combed and plaited in the highest style of darkey art, constrained him to listen with an appearance of respect to his "Mammy's" lectures; but as soon as she was out of hearing, his heels kicked up in the air, and his chuckling "ha-ha-ha!" proved his appreciation of them to be not altogether satisfactory.

Miriam was glad that her father was not at home, for the children were romping and shouting up and down stairs, the servants going in and out, and the house generally in a state of bustle and confusion that would have been distracting to Mr. Douglass. Breakfast was hurried over in a style very unlike the usual formality of the meal. Aunt Sabra's mind had been more intent upon the manufacture of her "cent-cakes," and mince-pies, and ice-cream—tempting wares from which she expected to realize large retail profits in Pungoteague—than upon the coffee and pone for breakfast. And "Jupe," (short for Jupiter Olympus!) had begged off from his attendance as waiter, so that he might get started an hour earlier. Lily and Geranium were the only ones left to render

any service; and they were of very little use indeed, for their hearts had gone with the rest to that delightful, unattainable Pungoteague; and their wide-open eyes stared at every thing but the cup or plate they were wanted to pass.

Miriam was indulgent to all accidents however this morning, and by way of consolation to the little hand-maidens, persuaded Aunt Comfort to let them have a ride in the wagon as far as the upper gate. Pussie declared she would go too; so all three were tumbled into the laps of the women, who were packed as closely together as their finery would allow, and Big Jim, with a flourish of his whip, set the cavalcade in motion. The stout horses sprang off at a round trot, as if they entered into the fun of the thing; and Pussie standing up in Aunt Comfort's lap, much to the tumbling of that grand black silk dress, waved her handkerchief with a shout to Horace and May, who watched them from the piazza.

The upper gate opened upon the country road, and that was alive, by the time they reached it, with vehicles of all descriptions. Gentlemen in rockaways and sulkies, lawyers in their smart curricles, farmers and planters in their roomy old-fashioned gigs, young men on their ponies, negroes of every age and size and appearance, in carts and wagons and wains, and on foot, were all travelling over the broad

road with various degrees of speed. Every body was going either to Pungoteague, Onancock, Drummondtown, or some other one of the villages scattered along the length of the peninsula. For every one of them on New Year's Day was a great gathering point, since all the business of the year was then and there to be transacted. In Accomac one can hire a servant, rent a house, buy a piece of land, hold a vendue, or do any thing else in short that is considered business, on no day but the all-important first of the year !

The children, after they had been dropped out of the wagon, hid themselves in the pine thicket that grew up tall and close, marking the line between Douglass Farm and the public road, to watch the passers-by for a while. There was plenty of racing and fast driving among the motley crowd, and Pussie grew greatly excited in watching the flying horses, especially whenever she recognized one that she knew.

"Oh Geranium ! here comes cousin Robert's new pony !" she exclaimed as a pretty little sorrel dashed by ; "*doesn't* he go fast ! as fast as a mile in a minute !"

"Dat ain't nuffin," Geranium answered scornfully. "Mas' Robert's pony ain't no 'count 'long with Mas' Laurie's. Takes *him* to get ober the groun' ! nobody can't ketch him,

'cept sometime Mas' Roger. Ki! dat's Mas' Roger now! Lookee dar, Miss Pussie!"

A pretty little curricie, drawn by a small but beautiful black horse, was rapidly approaching; and Pussie recognized it quickly as Roger Dennis's.

"Sure enough!" she cried, "and he is coming here too! See! Run, Lily—run, Geranium, and open the gate before he gets down."

The twins sprang to the gate with a bound, and Pussie with them in her eagerness to meet Roger, whom she liked very much. He was Laurie's best friend, and while their mother lived, used to come to Douglass Farm very often. Since then, he had not been there so much, because the cold welcome which Mr. Douglass gave him, always vexed and irritated the proud boy. He was none the less Laurie's friend, however; and he had always a merry word for Pussie too, whenever he saw her.

"Hullo! Miss Catharine Amelia, it isn't possible that's yourself;" he called out, as Pussie presented herself in front of the gate. "What in the world are you doing on the road, New Year's Day?"

"Waiting for you to take me home," Pussie answered saucily. "Pick me up, Roger."

"Not I," said Roger. "Pick yourself up, if you want a ride. Soh! woh! Robin Good-fellow!" for the black horse, as soon as the gate

was opened, wanted to dash through without waiting for any one.

“Jump in quick, Robin won’t stand,” he said. So Pussie made a spring into the curricie, Lily and Geranium scrambled up behind, and Robin Good-fellow started off in a gallop, as if his load was none a bit the heavier. They had a merry little drive up the avenue to the house, and there Miriam and Laurence were waiting on the piazza to meet Roger. For Laurence had expected him, they had agreed to go up to Pungoteague together, and Laurence was all ready with his hat and overcoat on. He jumped Pussie out, and took her place in the curricie beside Roger, who gave the reins to Robin Good-fellow, nodding good by to the girls—and soon they were out of sight again.

This was the last of the departures, and Miriam went back into the house, which looked almost deserted in its emptiness, to spend a quiet day with Grandmamma—we have not introduced you to her yet, but we will now if you will follow Miriam up stairs—who was sitting alone in her easy-chair, half asleep. Her own maid, Minerva, was engaged to Jupiter Olympus, and had got permission to walk up to Pungoteague with him. So Miriam had to take her place for the day, and wait upon her grandmother, who required constant attendance. A few months before the death of her daughter, Miriam’s mo-

ther, she had had a stroke of paralysis, which had left her helpless as a child. She could not walk, or even stand alone, and her nerveless hand was unable to grasp any thing; so that every service had to be performed for her as if for an infant. The stroke had paralyzed her mind as well as her body, and her comprehension now was like that of a child, to whom the simplest things must be over and over explained.

It was a wearisome task often to sit with the old lady, and while away the hours that passed so slowly and heavily for her; to answer all her often-repeated questions, to soothe her querulous complaints, to satisfy her causeless fears and suspicions. But Miriam tried to fill her mother's place in patient, faithful devotion to her helpless grandmother, and many hours of every day she spent with her; until the old lady grew to look for her coming, and depend upon her society as the chief pleasure of her life.

Miriam's own room was connected with her grandmother's and at night the door was always left open; so that, although Minerva slept by the side of her mistress's bed, she could still hear and go to her grandmother if she awakened. And as Minerva, like the rest of her race, was no light sleeper, Miriam often chose to get up herself, and do what was needed in the night,

rather than cail the maid. Many a night too, she would sit patiently by the bed, when grandmamma could not sleep, and listen to her rambling, incoherent stories, or, what was harder than any thing to do—go over and repeat to her all the sorrowful memories of her mother's sickness and death, for this was the last vivid impression which the poor old lady's shattered mind had received, the death of her only beloved daughter. And she dwelt upon it continually, making Miriam repeat to her every circumstance of the terrible period; and torturing herself and the child by imagining all sorts of vain and impossible remedies that might have been applied to save her life.

Mr. Douglass paid her a short visit every day, and grandmamma, who had a great admiration and respect for her son-in-law, was always pleased with his attention. The children too, ran in and out of her room through the day; but they were noisy and did not like to sit still and talk to her, and grandmamma was not very fond of them. It was upon Miriam that she depended chiefly, and upon Miriam that the chief responsibility of her comfort rested. And it was not the least of the young girl's cares.

She sent Pussie into the nursery to play, when she found her grandmother dozing, and sat down with her work beside her chair, that

she might watch her. It was her post through the day, except when doing some necessary errands down stairs, she left one of the children in her place. Grandmamma was never left alone, for fear of accidents. Once or twice when she had been unattended for a few minutes, she had attempted to get up and walk, and had fallen helplessly upon the floor; so that now Miriam was always very careful to see that some one was always with her.

They all had their cold dinner, or luncheon rather, in grandmamma's room, and Miriam made it a sort of feast for the old lady; so that she enjoyed having the party very much. She grew cheerful and communicative, and told the children old stories about her childhood; for she seemed to remember these better than any events of later years. While they listened and talked together, Miriam went down stairs, to see that the sitting-room was all in order, and to build up the fire freshly, that it might be bright and cheerful when her father came home. The short winter afternoon was wearing on to twilight, and as the sun sank lower, a chilly wind was rising. She knew that her father and Laurence would come home cold and tired; so she determined that every thing within the house should be cheerful and warm for them. And she hoped that they might come home in

peace and love, and all spend a happy evening together.

She drew her father's arm-chair up to the fire, which was burning brightly, full of glowing light and warmth, laid his slippers and dressing-gown ready for him, and drew the round table near, with the lamp upon it ready to be lighted when the twilight should close. When she had done every thing, she sat down by the window to watch for the arrivals. She heard already the songs and shouts of the negroes as they were on their homeward way, and the rattle of wheels in the distance upon the public road. And by and by, the stragglers from Douglass Farm began to return, singly, or in little groups. Minerva and little Jupe came first, for Minerva, in gratitude for the permission to go so early, had determined to be very punctual in her return. Soon after, the wagon made its appearance, with Aunt Comfort's towering turban in the centre ; and Miriam felt at ease then, for she knew that supper would be prepared, and everything in order before her father's return.

She watched for Laurence now, for she wished, though she scarcely knew why, that he might come before his father. It was partly that there might be no possibility of Mr. Douglass meeting Roger, whom of late he seemed to dislike so much, And also that all the chil-

dren might be at home, to welcome him after his absence. They were all down stairs by this time; Pussie romping before the fire with Horace; little May standing at the window, peering into the twilight that fast deepened into darkness, and wondering why Laurie didn't come. Miriam wondered too, but he did not come for all; and at last as she still looked out, she saw the dim outline of her father's gig at the lower gate, and Jupe plunging through the darkness down the avenue, to open it for him.

So she gave up the hope, and turned away to light the lamp, and open the door into the hall, that her father might have light when he came in. She herself went to the front door to meet him, as he stepped out of the gig on to the piazza. She called him "Father," and lifted her face timidly for a kiss; for she hoped that after his two days' absence, he might give her this rare token of affection. But he took no notice of the gentle, pleading face upraised to his, except with a mere nod of recognition, a careless "Is it you, Miriam?" as he passed by her into the hall, and threw off his cloak and hat. He did not even take her hand, or call her "daughter," and Miriam followed after him into the sitting-room with a heavy heart, more pained and disappointed than she had imagined she could be now, by treatment which had become so familiar to her.

She tried to smother the feeling, however, and look and speak cheerfully ; asking her father various little questions about his personal comfort and offering little attentions. But he declined them all, and so impatiently at last, that Miriam drew back silent and sorrowful, and gave up the effort to win him in any way. It was evident that to-night he was in one of his gloomiest moods. He leaned back in his arm-chair, stern and silent, his heavy brows drawn into a frown, his mouth rigid and unsmiling. The children gathered together in a group as far from him as possible ; and by and by they crept quietly out of the room, all three of them together. Miriam longed to go too ; she felt oppressed and dejected in her father's gloomy presence, and would have gladly accepted any means of escape from it. But she had no excuse for going, and she was thankful afterwards that she had not stirred ; for Mr. Douglass, though he had taken no notice of the children while they remained, looked after them as they went out, and said bitterly,

“That is the welcome my children give me when I come home. Five minutes in my presence is more than they can endure, and any company is to be preferred to their father's. It is truly a pleasant thing to come home to such loving and dutiful children !”

Miriam said no word in reply, for tears so

swelled her heart that she could find no voice to speak. And so there was another dreary silence for a while. Mr. Douglass looked around again at last, and asked suddenly,

“Where is Laurence?”

“He has not come home yet,” Miriam answered.

“Where has he been?”

“At Pungoteague, father; I thought you would have seen him.”

“No: he was very careful to avoid me, as he always is. Did he go alone?”

“No, father, Roger Dennis came for him.” Miriam spoke half hesitatingly, for she knew that the information would not please him. But she was not prepared for the burst of passion that her words called forth.

“It is Roger Dennis for ever!” he exclaimed angrily, striking his clenched hand against the arm of the chair. “An upstart boy whose own head is filled with the absurdest notions of independence and self-importance, and who is doing his best to make Laurence as bad as himself. And yet my son, against my expressed will and desire, chooses him for his boon companion, scorns my judgment, and braves my displeasure!—Why did you suffer him to go, Miriam, without remonstrance?” he asked, suddenly turning sharply upon her.

“I did not know that you had forbidden

him, father," Miriam began, startled and distressed; "I did not know—"

But he interrupted her impatiently—"You *should* have known, and that you did not know proves only how mindful you are of my words and my actions, which have all expressed disapproval of Laurence's intimacy with Roger Dennis. But you are like all the rest."

He strode up and down the room in his indignation; while she sat quite still, making no reply. These bitter taunts from her father seemed harder than any thing in the world to endure. "I cannot bear it any longer! I would rather die!" was the first wild thought that came to her, as she gave way to her uncontrollable agony. But it passed away in the first passionate outburst, and the same comforting words that had soothed her yesterday, "*Endure unto the end—ye shall be saved,*" crept into her heart again to make peace in the midst of its troubled commotion.

She was so calm and quiet when she went to the supper-table, showing no trace of her grief, except that her face was paler and more patient, that the children never guessed that any thing had distressed her. Only Aunt Comfort's eyes, quick and loving where Miriam was concerned, saw that something had happened; and she gave vent in the kitchen, after her

usual fashion, to her discontent and indignation :

“Wish to grashus Mas’r ’d go ’way some-whar and *stay*. Nebber come back ’gen, for we gits ’long a heap better widout um. First thing, soon as he gits home, he must be flyin’ at Miss Minnie ’bout somethin’ or other—Lord knows what! Mas’ Laurie I s’pose ; it’s allus him. And dar’s her eyes all washed out cryin agen, and she white as a ghost, and Mas’r lookin black as thunder at everybody. Don’ see how he can carry on so—do’no what sort o’ consusus he hab, sure ’nuff! Wonder de child’en don’t all run away, I do !”

“Maybe Mas’ Laurie done gone run away, a’ready ?” put in Jupe, who had been listening with great interest. “He aint come home yet, an I ’spec—”

But what he “’spected” was never known, for Aunt Comfort, with wrathful fingers twisted in his locks, brought his remarks to a sudden terminus.

“You specs, does you? I tell you what *I* specs, you sassy good-for-nothin’ nigger! Dat I’ll find out whether dis har o’ yourn ’s got any roots or not, ef ebber I ketch you talkin’ such stuff as dat agen. Mas’ Laurie run away, sure ’nuff! Cl’ar out o’ dis kitchen dis minnit, and don’ show your wall-eyes here ’gen to-night!”

A vigorous pull of the plaited locks enforced

her words, and Jupe was glad to escape out of her hands by obeying her. While Aunt Comfort muttered indignantly, "Dese young niggers ! dey 's too sassy for any kind o' use. Can't say nothin' 'fore 'em nowadays, but deir impident tongues must wag too."

CHAPTER IV.

It was ten o'clock; the massive hall-doors, studded with nails, were bolted and barred, the lamps extinguished in the sitting-room, and every one had retired for the night. Laurence had not come home yet, and Miriam still watched and waited for him, in her own room. He had never stayed away all night without his father's permission, and she hoped with all her heart that he would yet come home.

But she was destined to be disappointed, for two hours wore by while she still kept her lonely watch, and yet he did not come. So at midnight she was forced to give up the hope at last, and go to bed. The truth was, that Roger had persuaded Laurence to go home with him and spend the evening at Hollybrook. And they had had so merry an evening—Roger's sisters playing and singing, and then all dancing together, and then a New Year's cake, with apples and nuts and mottoes, and pleasant stories and talk with all—that the hours passed by unnoticed, and twelve o'clock came before any

one was aware of it. Then they would not suffer Laurence to go home, and he knew indeed that it would be better to stay away all night than to return at that late hour.

But he was sorry that it had happened so, for he had not intended it, and he knew Miriam would be anxious and his father displeased. For the latter consequence he cared very little, however ; he was growing of late reckless and indifferent as to his father's displeasure. He never could please him, he said to himself, whatever he did, therefore it was useless to take pains to obey him, since his father made so little distinction between his good and bad deeds. It was wrong and foolish reasoning, but Roger applauded it, and encouraged every demonstration of free thought and action in Laurence. It was a boyish bravado, and beyond this there were better and nobler qualities in Roger ; but Mr. Douglass knew very well in what estimation the boy held *him*, and from that view of his character condemned him wholly.

Laurence knew, as he rode homewards next morning, that he should "get a scolding," as Roger said, for his unauthorized absence. He did not shrink from it, however, but as soon as he arrived, went directly to his father's study, and knocked for admission.

"Well, sir !" was Mr. Douglass' greeting as he entered. "You have condescended to come home, I see."

Laurence's cheek flushed, but he answered respectfully, "I came in, father, to explain to you the reason of my absence last night."

"I am glad you have sufficient sense of duty left to see that it needs explanation," Mr. Douglass said coldly. "Sit down, sir, and let us hear what you have to say."

"I have very little to say," Laurence returned proudly, "except that it was not my intention to remain from home all night without your permission. But I spent the evening at Hollybrook, and the time passed so pleasantly that I was not aware of its flight, till it grew too late for me to go home."

"Very pleasantly, doubtless, forbidden fruit is usually most delightful. You went with the knowledge that I disapprove of your visits there entirely—your staying all night was but an aggravation of what was already disobedience."

"I went with no such knowledge, father," Laurence exclaimed indignantly. "I have visited at Hollybrook for years, and I do not understand why my going there now has so suddenly come to be accounted disobedience!"

"It is the more to be regretted, sir, that you have visited there so long," Mr. Douglass returned sternly. "I should perhaps have a more dutiful son if his chosen companion had been of a different stamp. However, since you

were not aware of my will before, please to remember now that I desire your visits to Hollybrook discontinued, and your intimacy with Roger Dennis to cease entirely. His influence over you continually increases, and your disregard of all authority save that of your own ungoverned will, is one consequence of its unworthy exercise. He is not a wise, or safe, or suitable companion for my son, and as your father I command your obedience in withdrawing from your undue intimacy with him. This is all I have to say to you on the subject, but I shall expect your compliance with my desire."

He waved his hand, as if for Laurence to go, but the boy stood still resolutely, with a hot indignant flush mounting to his brow, and a flash of defiance in his eyes.

"I have something to say, if you please, father," he said, with an effort to speak calmly, "and it is this, that you judge Roger Dennis most unjustly when you condemn him as you do ; and that knowing so well as I do how utterly undeserving of your blame he is, I never can promise to obey you in the thing you require. Roger is my friend, and I love him. I know him better than you do, and simply for your command, which is unkind and unreasonable, I cannot give him up !"

He did not waver or hesitate in his bold words, but looked steadily at his father, who rose up and confronted him angrily.

"Do you dare to speak to me in this way, sir? Have you forgotten whom you are addressing? Leave the room immediately, and never venture to use such language to me again. Go, sir; do you hear?"

"I will go, father," Laurence began, "but you must understand—"

"Not a word, sir," Mr. Douglass interrupted severely. "I will understand nothing but that you will do as I command you—or if you refuse, that I will make use of such measures as will sooner or later compel your obedience."

"Never!" cried the boy with passionate vehemence. "I will not bear it, I will not submit to it."

He had lost all control of himself, carried away by his angry indignation, and spoke as he had never dared to speak to his father before. There was a light cane lying upon the desk near which Mr. Douglass stood; incensed beyond measure at the boy's rebellious speech, he snatched it hastily, and struck Laurence once or twice across the shoulders.

"Now, sir, go," he exclaimed, pale with excitement; "and remember when you defy me again, that if I am a tyrant, I am still your father, and have and will exercise the power to chastise insolence."

Laurence turned and left the room without a word in reply. The first wild impulse had

been in his rage, to snatch the cane from his father's hands, and dash it away, or strike him in return perhaps. But it had all passed in a minute—the blows, his father's stinging words—and his own momentary impulse was controlled ; as with a firm step, and face white with intense suppressed passion, he strode out of the study. No one met him on his way up stairs, he felt as if he should have trampled down and crushed any one who had crossed his path then—and he went into his own room, and locked himself within.

He never knew how the hours of the day passed, as he sat there alone, a throng of wild thoughts and vague purposes in his heart, and his passionate anger swelling and surging like the waves of a stormy sea. The first interruption that came to him was Miriam's gentle knock and pleading voice at the door.

“Laurie, won't you let me in ?” she asked entreatingly. “It is almost dinner-time, and I want to speak to you before you go down.”

But he called to her without opening the door : “I don't intend to come down, Miriam, and I cannot let you in just now. I don't want to see anybody.”

“But, Laurie, just one minute !” she pleaded. “I want to speak to you so much.”

“Then you must speak where you are,” he said impatiently. “I cannot see anybody

now, not even you. For pity's sake go away, Miriam."

He was ashamed of his irritable words as soon as he had spoken them, and almost longed to recall them; but Miriam had gone already. He heard her retreating footsteps, slow and weary, as if she carried so heavy a heart with her. And, indeed, poor Miriam's heart was very heavy, burdened with a vague sense of some new and incomprehensible trouble. She had had one glimpse of her father's face, and that had chilled her with its rigid expression. Laurence had kept himself invisible all day. What had fallen between them she did not know, but she tortured herself with a thousand fears and anxieties, vainly trying to understand the matter.

And so the day dragged by, so heavily, every minute seemed an hour. Her father had not spoken a word at the table, and when he left it, shut himself in his study again. Laurence still did not appear, and Miriam at last, unable to endure any longer her suspense and apprehension, determined to make another effort to see him. He was just coming out of his room as she got to the door, his overcoat hanging upon his arm, as if he were preparing to go out. He stopped when he saw Miriam, though, put his disengaged arm around her, and kissed her, saying,

"Forgive me, Minnie, for speaking so harshly to you to-day. I hardly knew what I was saying. But promise me not to remember it against me, won't you?"

"If you will only tell me what is the matter, Laurie," Miriam exclaimed, pressing closer to him as he made a motion to leave her. "What has happened between you and father, and why have you acted so all day? Do not go, Laurie, please; but stay and tell me about it."

"I cannot stay now, Minnie, I must go," he answered excitedly. "You will know all about it time enough; there is something on my desk that will tell you. But now you must not keep me. Good-by, Minnie!"

He kissed her hastily, and drew himself away from her, and before she could speak he was down stairs, and out of sight. She went into his room and looked out of the window; down below, by the piazza steps, Jupe stood holding the bridle of Laurie's own horse. In another moment she saw Laurence himself come out, carrying a carpet-bag in his hand, which she had not noticed before, because it was concealed by his overcoat. Now he had the coat on, and the bag hung upon his arm, as he mounted his horse and rode away.

It had all passed so quickly and quietly, that Miriam, confused and bewildered, comprehended nothing; till suddenly, as Laurence vanished

from her sight amongst the thick trees of the avenue, a terrible thought flashed over her ; a thought which made her limbs tremble weakly beneath her, her heart faint and sicken with despair. She had no courage at first to seek for the "something" to which Laurence had alluded. She knew now instinctively what it would tell her—that her brother, in the outburst of some great passion, had determined at last to leave his father's house, to escape the bondage under which he had fretted so long, to forsake his home for ever ! She sank down, hiding her face in hopeless shame and sorrow, for now indeed it seemed as if "all the waves and billows had gone over her." This was even worse than any thing she had ever dreaded—in all her apprehensions for the future, she had never looked forward to this ; and hope and faith failed her in her dreary anticipations of the consequences that must ensue.

The letter lay upon Laurence's desk before her, and she took it up at last, though with a strange reluctance ; for she dreaded the confirmation of that which still she was already so sure of. It was a hastily written account of the morning's scene with his father—a declaration of his purpose to submit no longer to an unjust control—and a slight sketch of the plan he meant to act upon in his departure.

"I am going to Roger first," it went on to

say : " I made him a half promise some time ago, that I would go down to Northampton with him this week to make a visit at his Uncle Nottingham's. Mr. Nottingham has urged me a great many times to come down with Roger ; he was a dear friend of mother's, you know, Miriam, and he will be a friend to me now in helping me to form a plan for my future action. What that will be, I cannot tell yet, I am only determined upon one thing ; that I will no longer be dependent upon a father who knows so little how to use a father's power. Don't be afraid, however, that I shall make a fool of myself, after the fashion of school-boys playing truant. If I am only a boy in years, I am somewhat more than a boy in energy and will, and I shall neither faint nor fail in my purpose. You can do as you please about showing this note to my father. I shall write to you again, dear Minnie, as soon as I have decided any thing—and meanwhile do not break your heart about this affair. It is something that I have known must happen, sooner or later, for I knew I could not much longer endure the state of things at home. If I did not go now, I should perhaps do something worse ; for the sting of those blows pierced deeper than my shoulders, and I know not what wicked deed another meeting with my father would tempt me to commit. I am not patient and long-suffering as you, Minnie, and

your millennium is too far off for my waiting."

That was all ; and Miriam read and re-read it, but found no comfort for her sorrow and shame.

CHAPTER V.

Two weeks had passed by. Laurence was still with Roger and his uncle in Northampton, from whence he had once written to Miriam. The letter was filled with descriptions of the various riding and hunting and shooting parties which had been arranged for their visit, but nothing was said of any plan for the future. Indeed Laurence had no definite plan in view ; he had depended upon Mr. Nottingham to suggest something, and to aid him in carrying out some scheme of independence, but what he scarcely knew. The idea which was most attractive to him, was that he would go to the University, and in some manner work his way through. But Mr. Nottingham understood the impracticability of such a scheme better than Laurence did ; and he, indeed, gave him but little encouragement to attempt any thing of the sort.

He was indignant at Mr. Douglass's arbitrary prohibition, and unjust condemnation

of Roger; but he still saw that Laurence had done very wrong in leaving his father's house. And instead of aiding him in some rash enterprise, he advised him to undertake nothing at present, but to take time enough to consider the whole matter quietly, after the fire of his first anger was cooled. So he kept the boys with him, making their visit as pleasant as he could, in the hope that he might by and by induce Laurence to return to his father.

At Douglass Farm meanwhile, Laurence's absence had made but little outward change. Miriam had taken the letter to her father, pale and trembling and tearful, expecting she knew not what outburst of anger. But he had read it calmly through, without a change upon his stern countenance.

"Laurence is a fool," he said contemptuously, as he handed it back to her. "He will know it himself soon."

That was all, and afterwards he had not mentioned him, or alluded to him in any way. Whatever thoughts or feelings were working in his breast, Miriam could not know. More gloomy, more silent, more stern than ever, she never dared approach him, or speak to him, except in simplest answer to some necessary question or remark. All her own weary sorrow she must keep in her own heart, and sometimes the

burden seemed too heavy, too hopeless for endurance.

She satisfied the children's curiosity about their brother's absence, by telling them that he was making a visit with Roger; and she told the same thing to the servants who inquired for him. Only Aunt Comfort was not to be deceived. She knew the whole history as well as if she had read Laurence's letter, or been present at his interview with his father. But she kept her knowledge to herself, as far as the other servants were concerned, and did not even confide it to her prime minister, Aunt Sabra. Jupe, who was possessed of a very inquiring mind, had a shrewd suspicion that "Mas' Laurie wa'n't a wisitin' all dis time for nuffin' ;" but he was very careful not to make such observations within the range of Aunt Comfort's quick eyes and ears. Aunt Comfort was a most jealous defender of the family, and whatever she might say herself, nobody else was suffered to speak a word against any member of it. She loved Miriam especially with all her heart, and petted and pitied her now continually; but as all her attempts at consolation ended in scolding and railing at her master, it was not much comfort to Miriam.

It was the third week of Laurence's absence, and she sat alone in her own room one afternoon, watching the wandering snow-flakes, first

beginnings of a storm, which floated down from the gray black sky. It had been a dreary day to her; she could not employ herself with any thing for the vague unrest in her heart. Some shadow hung over her, which she could not define, a sort of haunting presentiment, an uncertain apprehension. She could not banish it for all her striving.

Outside of the window the snow-flakes were falling more thickly, specking the hard ground, and powdering the thick foliage of the firs and cedars. Miriam could see the great boughs of the graveyard pine whitening slowly in the soft, noiseless fall. An unspeakable yearning for her mother came over her, a longing to be folded in her arms, to lie at rest in her bosom, to be soothed into quietness and confidence once more by her gentle voice and touch. Oh, if it were only all a dream, she thought; only a troubled vision of the night—that her mother was dead, that her father was so changed, that Laurence had forsaken his home! If she could only throw it off like a terrible nightmare, and waken to happiness and peace once more!

She was startled suddenly from her indulgence in these dreamings, by a frightened cry from her grandmother's room.

"Oh, Miss Minnie, come quick, do please!" called Minerva in an agony of terror; and then Mabel sprang through the open door, crying affrightedly,

“Grandma’ is falling, Miriam—oh, come, and see what is the matter!”

Miriam was in her grandmother’s room in a moment: the old lady had fallen half-way out of her chair, her head drooping to the floor, her hands hanging lifelessly down; and Minerva bending over her, was trying vainly to lift her up. Miriam sprang to her assistance, fear and excitement lent her unwonted strength, and she raised her grandmother almost alone, and carried her to her bed. Herself was forgotten, and every other thought and feeling swallowed up in this overpowering excitement, as she hurriedly strove to recall her to consciousness. She had sent Mabel for her father immediately, and meanwhile made use of every restorative that she could remember. But neither her own efforts nor those of Mr. Douglass and Aunt Comfort, when they arrived, seemed of any avail. Her grandmother lay helpless, blind, and speechless.

Twice before Miriam had seen her stricken in this way, but never so terribly as now, and the spasm had never been of so long duration. For a whole hour she watched in sickening anxiety. If only the doctor would come, or if any change would take place! Any thing would be a relief from that terrible sameness of expression.

Jupe had gone to Pungoteague for the

doctor, mounted on one of the swiftest horses in the stable; but Pungoteague was distant seven miles from Douglass Farm, and it seemed an age to Miriam before he could reasonably be expected back. The spasm passed away at last before the physician came. Her eyes closed, the working mouth grew still, and a gentle slumber, childlike and serene, fell upon her. Miriam breathed a prayer of intense thankfulness, as she watched the peaceful rest into which her grandmother had subsided. Then she went to tell the children, who were gathered in the nursery, terrified and grieving, that grandmamma was a great deal better; and leaving Aunt Comfort to keep watch, she staid there with them, to recover a little from her overstrained excitement and suspense.

Dr. Kellam came by and bye, and after looking closely at Grandmamma, and asking a great many questions about her attack, the manner of its beginning, and so on; he said that she would probably sleep calmly till some time in the night, and need not be disturbed. But that when she wakened, certain medicines which he left should be administered. He would come again the next day, he said. Mr. Douglass went to the door with him as he left, and the two stood talking together a few minutes. Miriam could not hear what they said

at first, but at last she heard the doctor's voice as if in reply to something her father had asked.

"Possible, barely possible," he was saying. "A third attack is not *always* fatal, but it is very apt to be. She is old and very much enfeebled; I am afraid she will not weather it."

They went down stairs together, and Miriam heard no more, but she had already heard enough; and her heart grew cold with a strange, fearful awe. Her grandmother would die! Death, the solemn, terrible mystery, was at hand once more, its dreary shadow again darkening over the household. When would the night end, and the dawn appear?

The room was hushed and dim; the drawn curtains shut out the snow-storm, and Aunt Comfort sat by the bedside, keeping guard over her old mistress, whose breath in her slumber rose and fell evenly as an infant's. Miriam passed on into her own room, and sat down by the window, watching the snow and the twilight as they fell together, and trying to look through the cloud to the graveyard beyond. She remembered the mossed headstone which bore her grandfather's name—" *Laurence Douglass: Aged 31.*" On one side of it was a row of little graves, four in number, all overrun with myrtle-vines, and the child-names on their stones half hidden by the climbing sprays. They were her mother's little brothers and

sisters who had died in childhood; then the young father died, and now after all these many years, the vacant place by his side was to be filled. The wife and her husband, the mother and her little children, soon to be reunited.

Miriam's tears fell silent and fast as the falling snow-flakes, as she thought over these things. She pictured her grandmother's room lonely and desolate, the cushioned chair in which she had sat for so many months, unused and empty, a darkness and silence like a shadow over every thing. Then she went back to the time in which she remembered her not old and helpless and childish, but so fond and careful of the children, so indulgent to them all, and especially to herself. How many tokens of her tender love she had had, how many times she had nursed her in childish illnesses, how many pleasures and favors she had procured for her, and how much she had done for her every way in all those past years! Miriam remembered the first beginning of her failing health—and how slowly and gradually from that time her strength of mind and body had given way. How in growing feeble and helpless, she had grown irritable and unreasonable also; how memory failed her, and her intellect was like a child's in its limited comprehension.

Then Miriam wept more bitterly, for she

recalled times when she had not been patient and forbearing as she might have been; when her grandmother's querulousness and troublesome exactions had so irritated her that she would speak sharply and ungently, and often wound the poor spirit already so tried and chastened. This was the bitterest memory of all; and in her sorrowful self-reproach, she thought that if only her grandmother might be spared a little while longer, her life should be spent in devotion to her. With all these recollections stirring in her heart, Miriam had forgotten for a time the one thought that till now had been nearest it—Laurence. It came back to her suddenly, bringing a sharper pain at first, for she thought, "He will be away when Grandmamma dies, he will never see her again!" But then a ray of hope sprang quickly into life, and for a moment she forgot her sorrow in the eagerness of a sudden joyful anticipation. This was, that Laurence would come home now: if he could know that his grandmother was so ill, he would surely, surely come, she said earnestly to herself. And if he came back now, then in the one common grief all faults might be forgiven, all injuries forgotten, and the peace she had so longed for might at last be established.

She lighted a lamp, for it was almost dark, and wrote a hasty but earnest letter to Lau-

rence; telling him of what had happened, and praying him to come home that he might once more see his grandmother alive. When she had finished the letter, she carried it to her father, and asked his permission to send it to Pungoteague, that it might go down to Northampton by the mail. He granted it by a simple assent, but asked no question as to what she had written. Miriam was, however, too thankful for the opportunity to send her letter, to care for any thing else, and she hurried away to look for Jupe. That individual looked somewhat dismayed at the prospect of another journey to Pungoteague at this late hour. "Lord-a-messy, Miss Minnie!" he began remonstratingly, "you ain't gwine make me trabbel to Pungoteague 'gen to-night, is you? It'll be pitch dark 'fore I gits half way dar! I ain't hardly got back, 'nother, an' ole Wash, he's blowed wid runnin' all de way."

"Then you must take Selim," Miriam said. "I wouldn't send you if I could help it, Jupe; but it's a letter for 'Mas' Laurie' to tell him about Grandma; and I'm afraid if it doesn't get to the office to-night, it will not reach him time enough to do any good."

"What 'bout ole mistis?" Jupe asked eagerly. "She ain't gwine to die, not dis time, Miss Minnie?"

"She is very sick," Miriam answered, "and Dr. Kellam is afraid she won't get over it."

"I'se real sorry, Miss Minnie ! Lord-a-messy !" Jupe exclaimed ; " I thought she jist had a fit, nebber 'spected she was goin' to die. Minerva, she'll be breakin' her heart arter ole mistis ; " and Jupe, repeating his favorite adjuration over and again in his sympathy for Minerva, and his grieving for " ole mistis," started off uncomplainingly to take his ride in the dark to the post-office ; while Miriam went back to her grandmother's room, to watch the peaceful slumber, so soon to be changed into the solemn, never-wakening sleep of Death.

CHAPTER VI.

"You go to bed, honey," said Aunt Comfort. "'Ta'nt no kind o' use, your sittin' up, only jes' make yourself sick. I'se 'ten' to ole mistis; you can't do nuffin for her."

It was nearly midnight, and Grandmamma lay still in that profound, unbroken slumber from which she had not once stirred. Miriam, in spite of Aunt Comfort's repeated entreaties to go to bed, had persisted in keeping watch also; and she still replied in answer to her last remonstrance,

"I cannot go, Aunt Comfort; I couldn't sleep if I went. Or if I did, and Grandmamma should wake while I was gone, I never should forgive myself; I shall not make myself sick, you need not be afraid."

"'Cause you been an' done it a'ready, den," Aunt Comfort whispered grumbling. "You'se white as a ghost now, wid dem black rings round your eyes. Can't be satisfied to keep 'em cryin' all day, but you mus' hab 'em open all night too. Go 'way any how, an' sit

down thar in your Gran'mammy's big chair—you'se breakin' your back sittin' here, wid nothin' to hold you up."

To please Aunt Comfort Miriam left her post at the foot of the bed, and sat down in the large chair. Though with some reluctance, for she could scarcely bear to move her eyes from her grandmother's face; and the chair was so placed that she could no longer see her, neither did she dare to move it for fear of disturbing her. But she could not sleep, as Aunt Comfort fancied she would, resting amongst its soft cushions. Too many troubled thoughts were stirring in her heart, too many old memories uprising, and over all brooded the fearful sense of Death's terrible presence. She came back to the bedside by and by, too restless to stay long away, and Aunt Comfort, seeing that it was useless, made no further remonstrance.

So the hours passed on in their solemn march, midnight gave place to the twilight of early dawn, and the sun rose, brightening over the snow at last. But neither change nor consciousness of outward change came to her who lay in her long and placid slumber. No one could tell what sweet dreams glided through it; but the face that awake had been so old and withered and troubled, lay now in this sleep fair, serene, and beautiful as if the brightness of a heavenly vision were reflected on it. Every

line or wrinkle was smoothed; the eyelids closed so gently, the light breath floating softly and evenly through the lips, parted as with a smile. Miriam thought she had never seen a little child more beautiful in its sleep.

But she longed to waken her; it was growing terrible to her, this long, trance-like rest. She called her softly once, and then again more loudly; then she bent over and kissed her lips, and moved her hands; but it was as if she had touched a statue, there was no more response. Aunt Comfort tried too, with less gentle movements; and Mr. Douglass, when he came in and found that she had never stirred through the night, made an effort likewise to break the spell of her sleep. But nothing availed to disturb it. Miriam turned away sick and sorrowful from the hopeless attempt.

Dr. Kellam arrived in the course of the morning, and found his patient as he had left her the day before. There was no sign of awakening, and though he too, as the others had done, tried to arouse her, he met with no better success. There was nothing for him to do, for he knew well enough that the only ending of this sleep would be death. All his own knowledge and experience, all the power of his drugs and medicines, could avail nothing here.

Miriam knew by one glance at his face as he turned from the bedside, that there was no

hope ; and then by the sinking of her heart, the sudden faintness which came over her, she knew that almost unconsciously she had been cherishing a hope, that the evil day might not come yet, that if only for a little while, it might still be postponed. It was all over now, though, and she resumed her place by the bed, quietly to wait for the end ; patient and resigned, but with an unspeakable sadness in her heart.

The children crept in and out of the room through the day, gazing at their grandmother with awe-stricken faces, and asking frightened questions in solemn whispers. Pussie clung to Miriam all day, her little face pale with grief and fear. She would not go away, but she was very quiet, and unlike her usual self, scarcely spoke at all. So Miriam suffered her to stay, and the child sat at the foot of the bed, white and silent ; watching the face of her grandmother, and striving to recall her vague memories of the first time when she had seen death.

Mr. Douglass came in every hour to see if there were any change ; but the day wore by again, morning and noon and evening, and still the breath of the sleeper rose and fell as evenly, and her face lay unvaried in its expression of profound repose. The crisis seemed no nearer now than when the slumber first fell upon her ; and Miriam, who was faint and weary with her long vigil, gave up her place to her

father at dusk, and went out to seek a little rest, to strengthen herself for the night-watch before her. She could not sleep for her nervous excitement; but she thought a brisk walk in the cool, frosty air would refresh her. So she threw a shawl around her, and ran down the beaten path in the snow to the gate. There she seated herself upon the trunk of an old fallen poplar, which had been blown down in a great storm years ago, and since then had been a favorite seat with the children. Mabel and Horace amused themselves in jumping over its jagged points and knots, and got many a tumble in the exercise. Pussie had a "see-saw" at one end of it, which Lily and Geranium alternately balanced for her; and Laurence and Miriam had sat there together many a summer evening, watching the stars, the clouds silvered by the moonlight, and listening to the song of the wind in the rustling poplar leaves.

Miriam recalled those many pleasant evenings, as she brushed away the snow piled upon the log, and sat down alone in the darkness and cold. Where was Laurence now? would he never come home again? She looked back to the house, showing dark and gloomy amongst the sombre firs, and thought of the shadow of *death brooding over it now; and how her* brother, who should be with her to help her bear this grief, was still away, and would not return

at all perhaps. She grew sick with the fear, it seemed too much to bear, and yet for a moment it weighed upon her like a fearful certainty.

All day she had been upon a strain of expectation: she knew that it was impossible for Laurence to have received her letter so soon, yet still she had cherished a wild hope that something would bring him home that day; and every sound of wheels had awakened vivid expectation, only to be followed by disappointment. She looked for him now, straining her eyes into the darkness that grew deeper all the while, and listening with her keenest attention for the distant rattle of a carriage in the road. But none came for her watching and waiting, and at last she rose up to return to the house, knowing that she would be missed and wanted if she stayed longer.

The wind swept, wailing, through the bare leafless poplars as she walked up the avenue; and brought her the sound of an old negro hymn which one of the men was singing. She could not see the singer, but the words and the air—a rude chant set to a strange wild melody, like most of the negro songs—blown back by the wind fell distinctly upon her ears.

“Get a-ready, get a-ready,
Blow, Gabriel, blow!
Get a-ready, get a-ready,
An’—a blow, Gabriel, blow!”

“The dyin’ day’s a-comin’,
Oh blow, Gabriel, blow!
The dyin’ day’s a-comin’,
An’ we all got to go.”

She had heard it sung amongst the negroes often before, and laughed many a time at its odd monotonous refrain. To-night it fell upon her heart like a dirge, solemn and wild, and she was glad to escape into the house where she could no longer hear its haunting strain. She went into the sitting-room, but no one was there, and the room had a neglected, desolate look. Across the hall, she saw a line of light under her father’s study door, and heard his step in the room; so she knew that no change had taken place in her absence, else he would not have been there. Pussie, meeting her on the stairs, confirmed her belief: “Grandma’ is asleep yet, Minnie—oh, sister, will she never wake up?” was the child’s troubled question; and Miriam could only put her arms round her, and answer sorrowfully, “God will wake her up, Pussie, by and by, but it will be in Heaven. She will never see us again!”

Another night passed as the last had done, Miriam keeping watch again. Minerva slept upon the floor at the foot of the bed, and Aunt Comfort dozed in the arm-chair. But Miriam was sleepless, heart and brain were too full of troubled thoughts, grief, and anxious disquiet.

Laurence still was the burden of her anxiety. "If he will only come home! If he may see her once before she dies!" was the continual cry of her agony, and all night long this was her fervent, passionate supplication. She scarcely rose from her knees all through the long hours from midnight till dawn, but prayed with tears and anguished pleading, till the morning twilight crept into the room again.

As it grew stronger, dispelling the shadows that hovered around, and expanding into broad daylight, Miriam saw that her grandmother's face wore a different expression since the night before. She was breathing calmly and regularly still, but her lips were colorless, her cheeks sharpened in their outline, and a shadow seemed to have fallen over her eyes, they were so dark and sunken. She could not resist the impression that this was the death change; and Aunt Comfort, who came at her call, exclaimed quickly as soon as she saw her:

"Oh, Miss Minnie, ole mistis dyin' now for sure. You'll nebber sit up wid her 'gen, honey, she won't be 'live dis night!"

"Must I call papa?" Miriam asked, trembling and faint, for though she had known so long that this must be, she still could not meet it bravely at last.

But Aunt Comfort answered, "Not yet, honey; she ain't gwine jis' dis minnit. She'll

hold out till dark, maybe; but 'fore dis time tomorrow, she'll be waking up in Heaven. Bress de Lord!"

"If she could only wake up once and speak to us before she died," Miriam said sorrowfully, as she leaned over and pressed her lips lightly to her grandmother's forehead. "And if Laurie were at home to see her before it is all over, I could bear it better. That is the hardest thing of all, Aunt Comfort, that he is away!"

"Maybe he'll come back arter all, honey," Aunt Comfort answered soothingly, longing to find some consolation for her darling. "Don't you think 'bout his bein' gone, and bimeby he'll be comin' when you'se not lookin' for him. Should'n' wonder ef he was on his way home dis minnit anyhow—should'n' be s'prised a bit, Miss Minnie, I 'clar! Jest you wait awhile, honey, and don' 'stress yourself 'bout Mas' Laurie. Ole mistis ain't gone yet."

The words had scarcely passed Aunt Comfort's lips, when a sound was heard in the stillness of the early morning that startled them both alike. It was the clatter of a horse's hoofs, galloping rapidly over the hard-trodden snow. Nearer and more distinct it came momentarily; and Miriam with a great effort suppressing the cry of joy that rose to her lips, sprang out of the room and down the stairs with impetuous eagerness, never stopping to look from the

window even, but hurrying on to meet her brother; for her heart told her truly enough that he had indeed come home at last.

With hands trembling in their eager excitement, she unlocked and unbarred the heavy hall door, and ran down the steps of the piazza just as Laurence had checked his hard-ridden horse in front of them. He leaped off, with an exclamation of joy at sight of his sister, and next moment held her clasped tightly in his arms. Neither could speak for a minute, but Miriam struggling with her sobs, exclaimed presently—

“Oh, Laurie, I am so glad! You have come just in time to see Grandma’ before she dies.”

“Thank God!” Laurence replied fervently. “I was so afraid I might be too late, Minnie! I never got your letter till midnight, last night. We had been out on a coon-hunt, and when we got home I found it. I wanted to start off that minute, but Mr. Nottingham would not hear of my going till I was rested a little, and so I was compelled to wait till three o’clock this morning. But I am in time after all, and I am so thankful!”

He was much excited, and his voice trembled with tearful earnestness; Miriam had scarcely expected to see him so much moved. He followed her upstairs into their grandmother’s room—neither of them had mentioned

their father—and after a whispered greeting to Aunt Comfort, took his place beside the bed. Miriam watched him as he gazed in deep sadness upon the changed face before him. Lying here with the shadow of death upon it, dumb, solemn, and awful almost as if the lingering soul had already departed—it thrilled the boy's heart with an inexpressible blending of awe and sorrow and self-reproach.

When he had seen her last, those eyes so deathlike now, had brightened with a kindly smile for him, and the mute lips had spoken loving words. She had always been so fond and proud of him, her oldest grandchild; and bitter tears of grief and shame filled his eyes as he recalled her unvarying tenderness, so ill repaid at times by him. He had gone away in his indignation, without a thought of her, without even coming to say one last word to her—and now he could never speak to her again! It was the first fruit of his wrongdoing, and it seemed very bitter indeed.

But Miriam scarcely thought of all this: her heart was overflowing with thankful joy for Laurence's timely return, and for the while every other feeling was merged in this. She had gone into her own room, that for a moment she might kneel down and pour out all her thankfulness to God, who had heard her and sent her such abundant answer. She had been

faithless and despairing, but God had been so good ! For a minute she prayed eagerly for forgiveness, and help to trust Him more fully. Then, comforted and strengthened, she went softly back into the room she had left—just in time to meet her father, as he entered by an opposite door.

CHAPTER VII.

LAURENCE did not hear his step, as lost in his own thoughts, he still bent over his grandmother, or see him, until Mr. Douglass was at his side. Then aware of his presence, he started to his feet in a flush of embarrassment, half of which was shame and distress, half still a boy's sturdy defiance. He had scarcely thought of his father at all: Miriam's letter had not mentioned him; she only pleaded for his return that he might see his grandmother for the last time. Overwhelmed with that grief and excitement, he had never asked himself what he meant to do, farther than that he must get home as quickly as possible. But now at this first sight of his father, all the past came back to him, and such a mingled tide of feeling rushed over him, that for the time he had no command of speech or action.

Mr. Douglass, at first almost equally startled at the unexpected meeting, recovered his self-

possession more readily, and greeted his son coldly and calmly, as if after an ordinary absence.

"When did you arrive?" he asked in a low voice, as Laurence gave place to him to approach the bed.

"Only a few minutes ago, sir," Laurence replied in the same tone, and with a struggle to steady his voice to his father's calmness. "I only received my sister's letter at midnight, and have been riding since three this morning. I am glad I am not too late."

"You are in time—barely;" Mr. Douglass answered coldly. "Your grandmother is dying now, and will not probably recognize you again. Your absence at this period was unfortunate, to say the least."

This was the only allusion made to it, at that time, or ever after. Mr. Douglass's manner was the same to his son as it had been before his departure; no one could detect a shade of difference; he seemed completely to have ignored the three weeks of unauthorized absence from his home and protection.

Laurence vainly puzzled himself to understand this strange forbearance, and a thousand conflicting suggestions with regard to it agitated his mind, as he sat near him through the long dreary day in the darkened death-chamber. Mr. Douglass scarcely left the room: Laurence

never once stirred from the bedside ; but for all the absorbing interest which bound him there, his thoughts still wandered away into troubled ponderings upon his father's behavior, and his own future action. What should he do? was the restless question that rose up continually, even before his grandmother's dying face. How could he remain now, after all that had happened? Yet how could he go away again, and leave Miriam alone in her new sorrow? and whither indeed could he go? What did his father mean? and what would be the end of all?

Miriam likewise pondered the same things in her heart, only she had a hidden strength to endure the restless anxiety.

It was late in the afternoon, and the winter sunset streamed with a faint subdued glow through the darkened windows. The children clustered round the bed, and beyond them were groups of the negroes from house and field and quarter, who had come to see "ole mistis" once more. Minerva sobbing bitterly, Jupe standing by with a troubled look, the little twins hiding themselves affrightedly in Aunt Comfort's gown.

Mr. Douglass was standing by the bed, half raising grandmamma's head from the pillow, a relief that she needed now. Laurence with trembling hands supported her on the other side.

One long, sobbing respiration struggled up from her heart, then two or three soft breathings, each shorter and fainter than the other ; and with the last of these the prisoned soul was freed from its weary bondage of flesh. There was no more awakening on earth, no more knowlege of human pain, or view of human sorrow.

Mr. Douglass laid the poor head reverently back upon the pillow ; Miriam weeping sorrowfully, kissed the closed lips and the eyes sealed for everlasting slumber ; and the negroes broke forth into loud wailing and lamentation for “ ole mistis.”

It echoed mournfully through the house, dying away in the distance, as one after another they left the room. Mr. Douglass went to his study, Laurence to his own room, and the children, with Lily and Geranium, grouped together round the nursery fire, in their vague, half-terrified grief. Only Miriam stayed in the desolate room, while Minerva and Aunt Comfort did their last work for the mistress who should no more need their service.

Miriam looked out of the window away to the graveyard, where the snow lay glistening in the last sunset rays. She thought of the new grave to be opened there, and the darkness and dreariness of its narrow limit ; but another thought drew her look upward to the sky, flashing in golden brilliance ; and suddenly to her heart came the

words, "*brought out of darkness into marvellous light.*" They left a trustful peace with her, which comforted her through all the lonely night.

The third day after was appointed for the burial, and the great parlor was filled again as it had not been since the summer-time. From far and near friends and relatives of the family came to pay the last honor to its oldest member. The burial service was said, the funeral sermon spoken, and again a sorrowful procession wound through the broad hall, and across the wintry lawn into the graveyard. But for her who was laid at rest there, there was no more sorrow. The corruptible had put on incorruptible, the poor mortal was already clothed with immortality. And Miriam, even in the midst of her yearning sense of loneliness and orphanhood, thanked God that her grandmother, weary and burdened with many years, at last "rested from her labors."

She leaned upon Laurence's arm as they went back to the house, and he supported her with tender care; for the grief and anxiety of the past weeks, and her sleepless vigils since her grandmother's illness, had worn upon her very much. Even since all need for watching was over, she had scarcely slept at all; and her pale face, heavy eyes, and drooping figure bespoke her complete mental and physical exhaustion.

Mr. Douglass himself noticed it at last, and

with unusual consideration sent her away to her room. And Miriam, thoroughly worn out, and feeling now as if every thing had come to an end, was glad to go. A long, profound sleep, over which Aunt Comfort kept careful guard to see that nothing disturbed it, proved a great refreshing to her. She felt better when she woke than she had for many days before, and as her eyes opened upon Laurie, whose face she could see dimly in the twilight beside her, she was almost happy again. She lay still for a little while, keeping her eyes closed, but feeling Laurie's hand softly clasping hers, and trying to recall the memories which her long unconsciousness had scattered.

He bent over and kissed her presently, asking softly, "Are you awake, Minnie?"

"Oh yes, and I feel so much better," she answered. "My sleep has done me good. Have you been waiting here long, Laurie?"

"Not very, I am glad if you are better. You have been looking so wretchedly since I came back, I could not bear to see you."

Miriam pressed her brother's hand gratefully: "I will not look so any more then," she said; "now that you are here, I do not mean to look or feel wretched again. But indeed, Laurie, I could not help it while you were gone. It was the dreariest time in all my life; I do not think I could bear to live through it again,

with all its cruel suspense and anxiety, and all the shame and misery I felt. You do not know, Laurie, how terrible your going away in that fashion was to me!"

"Was it a pleasure-trip to me, either?" Laurence asked with some heat. "What else could I do? I would not stay in any man's house, if he were twenty times my father, and submit tamely to such injustice and oppression. No! and you must not think that I have come to stay now, Miriam. I have thought it all over, and I have determined, that if my father will not withdraw his interdict against Roger, and allow me to be something more than a slave in my own home, I will leave it again, and make freedom and independence for myself elsewhere!"

He spoke indignantly, with a boy's pride and self-confidence; but Miriam listened with grief and alarm.

"You cannot mean that, Laurie," she exclaimed eagerly. "You surely will not go away again, and separate yourself from father for ever and entirely! He has been kind to you since you came back; he has not spoken one harsh word; you never have determined to do so wrong and wild a thing again!"

"It is nether wrong nor wild when it is unavoidable," Laurence answered. "My father has not said a harsh word to me it is true, but

then he scarcely could while grandmamma lay dead in the house. He has hardly spoken to me in any way, and has given me no opportunity to say any thing to him. But I must speak to him soon, and that as I never have done before. If he is my father, I have nevertheless some rights which he must respect. If he will not, then I shall feel myself free from any obedience to him, and then I shall go away and try my own strength in a battle with the world."

His strength ! The slender figure was erect and manly, and the boy's heart beat high with more than boyish courage and steadfastness ; but for all that he had little idea of the world he talked of "battling" with, and his self-confident strength would have proved strange weakness in the encounter. Miriam, though she was younger, and with less experience, still, maybe, had yet a far wiser appreciation of the difficulties before him. She knew too that it was all wrong, and no provocation could justify him in thus casting off the duty of honor and obedience which he owed to his parents. But he had reasoned plausibly, he had spoken calmly ; and in the mental weakness and confusion which accompanied her lack of physical strength, she scarcely knew how to answer or argue with him.

She lay still without speaking for a while, and Laurence was silent, waiting for her reply. The

short twilight had deepened almost into darkness around them, and he did not see the bitter tears, half passionate, half despairing, which had gathered in her eyes and rolled slowly, uncared-for, over her face. At that moment she felt so desolate, so almost hopeless, in her sense of utter powerlessness to prevent this evil, or any other.

Laurence stooped down presently to the pillow, and laid his cheek against Miriam's, all wet with her tears. They startled him, and he drew his arms round her, and raised her up in them tenderly, till her head rested upon his breast. Her grief distressed him, and he longed to soothe it, for he knew he had been the cause of it. Miriam hid her face upon his shoulder, saying with a half sob, in answer to his entreaties "not to cry"—

"I am so weak still, Laurie—I cannot help it. It breaks my heart, the thought of your going away again. Indeed, I cannot, cannot bear it!"

And then the burst of grieving sorrow, which she could not any way restrain, and which shook her whole frame, troubled and perplexed Laurence greatly. His pride and resolve already began to waver before the influence of this strong emotion. But Miriam conquered it soon with a great effort of will, checked the struggling sobs, and dashed away her tears. She raised herself up, and said pleadingly,

"You must not be vexed with me, Laurie, I will not do so again. It was only because I was so weak, and couldn't help it."

"Yes, you have just worn yourself out with every thing lately," Laurence answered, glad of an excuse to change the subject of their conversation. "You are almost sick, and you had better go to bed regularly, and not think of coming down stairs to-night. I will go away, for you must not be excited with any more talking."

But Miriam clung to him: "No, you must not leave me yet. I have not said any thing to you that I wanted to say, and it will not do me any good to go to bed, if I keep this trouble with me. Stay, Laurie."

"Well, Minnie, what do you want to say?" He sat down beside her again, and she took both his hands in hers, and looked steadily into his eyes, her own full of sorrowful earnestness. "I hardly know what I want to say," she began, "because I cannot think clearly enough now to argue with you. I only know that you are all wrong, Laurie—that you haven't any right to dictate to father how he shall treat you—and much less to break away from his control because he may not choose to accept your dictation. He is your father, and you must obey him, because it is God's word."

"But not if he is unjust, unkind, and commands wrong things!" Laurence interrupted hastily.

"There is no 'if;'" Miriam said simply, "only 'Honor thy father and mother!' And if you were only to obey when it was easy and pleasant to yourself, there would not be much need for the commandment. But you can see all that as well as I, Laurie. I cannot argue, I am only asking you, praying you, for my sake, for your own, for *mother's* sake, Laurie, not to go away. Promise me—for mother's sake!"

"*For mother's sake!* Miriam—you always say that," the boy answered with a sort of impatient compunction in his tone, "because you know I cannot resist it; and yet why should it be for mother's sake? Nothing that I do can affect her now; she can neither know of, nor be troubled by any of our unhappiness or wickedness."

"Who knows, Laurie? She may be near us at this very minute; she may be allowed to know all that concerns us, and have an angel's charge over us! I think of such a thing so often, I cannot tell you. Many a time I have fancied that I felt her presence near me, and it has been to me such a comfort, and yet such a warning. But if this is all a fancy even, we can still remember what was her will and desire, and for the sake of all she was to us, try to

avoid doing what we know would pain and distress her if she were in our midst. Your plan carried out, would almost break her heart, Laurie."

"There would be no need for such a plan, if she were here," he murmured gloomily.

"Then let her memory be powerful as her presence to prevent the need of it now," Miriam pleaded. "Dear Laurie, for mother's sake, promise me!"

"After all, what am I to promise?" Laurence said irresolutely. "That I will stay at home, when perhaps I shall not be allowed to stay! For in spite of all his calmness with me, I do not believe that father has forgiven, any more than he has forgotten, my going away as I did. Perhaps for a punishment he will send me off now, himself! I know it cannot be long before I am called to account for it in some way."

This was a new fear to Miriam, and it struck a sudden chill to her heart. In her eager pleading to prevent Laurence's action, she had forgotten to think what might be her father's course; but now she could not but acknowledge that it would be impossible for him to pass over in silence so open and wilful a contempt of his authority. What would he do? She trembled at the thought of his power, and how he might use it; but she would not let her

brother see how anxious and disturbed she really felt. She answered quietly,

“Never mind that, Laurie, now; that is done, and cannot be recalled, so we must take the consequences, whatever they may be. If father is harsh and unkind, you must bear it patiently, because you have done wrong. Only promise me, not for any temptation, to do the same wrong thing again.”

“I do not see it to be such a wicked thing as you seem to think, Minnie;” Laurence replied, rising to go. “And it isn’t very clear to me how I am to act. But you have persuaded me—and for your sake, and mother’s, I will promise what you wish. Good night, Minnie. I will not go away till father sends me.”

He left her alone, and she lay still in the darkness, pondering this thought. *Would* his father send him away? and where? Had he, in all this quietness, only been devising some plan of punishment and mortification more effectual than any that had occurred before? Or might it be possible after all, that he would forgive this crowning act of rebellion? She scarcely dared to hope it; but she could not come to any satisfying conclusion by all her troubled turning of the matter, and so she tried to put it out of her mind, and only think of and be thankful for the promise she had won from her brother.

"It was only for mother's sake that he gave it at last," she said to herself. "After all, though we cannot see her, she is not lost to us yet, for even her memory will do us good all the days of our lives!"

She knelt down, and prayed in earnest thankfulness, that this sweet influence might abide with them always. That the spirit of love and peace embodied in each memory of the lost mother, might win each and all into perfect union; and at last into a knowledge of the only sure foundation of happiness, the only true and unfailing source of consolation.

There was comfort beyond expression in this pouring out of every emotion, every trouble, fear, and desire, to her Heavenly Father. It was growing daily an increasing supply of strength and consolation to her, and she only found that as she drew more largely upon it, it yielded her more abundant return.

"Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong,
Or others—that we are not always strong;
That we are ever overborne with care;
That we should ever weak or heartless be,
Anxious, or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy, and strength, and courage, are with Thee?"

CHAPTER VIII.

MABEL and Horace were sitting on the rug before the fireplace, with a book between them, reading by the broad blaze of the light-wood knots which Jupe had lavishly interspersed in every crevice between the high-piled oaken logs. In the daytime, when they could romp through the house, and out of doors, and be better employed in hunting up mischief, and falling into innumerable "scrapes" and misfortunes, the twins only took up a book by compulsion; but to see them at night, you would fancy them the most studious and absorbed of book-loving children. The story-books and fairy-tales had full power over them as soon as the daylight disappeared; and in their eagerness, they never could wait for the lighting of the lamp, but planted themselves before the fender in the midst of a heat and glow which would have scorched Miriam's face, but which they bore almost as indifferently as Lily and Geranium themselves.

Geranium Flower—with the red bow on her

shoulder displaced by a huge black one, in token of mourning—was making “cat’s cradles” on her own fingers and Lily’s, to amuse Miss Pussie, who herself in a lazy humor, was lying at full length on the sofa. She was a little cross and out of temper besides, for when she had gone to the window at the further end of the room, where Laurence and Miriam had been talking so long, Miriam had sent her away; and Pussie was a little piqued and indignant at the idea that her company should ever be unwelcome to them. “Laurie had no right to keep Minnie all to himself, any way,” was her little petulant conclusion. “It’s no reason, because he goes and stays away ever so long, that when he comes back he must only talk to Minnie all the while, and keep her away from every body else!”

But in spite of Pussie’s vexation, the talk at the window went on still; till she grew tired of the cat’s cradle, and tired of her own thoughts, and ran off to find pleasanter company in the kitchen. Laurence was vexed, dissatisfied, unhappy; and Miriam had had much to do in the week that had succeeded her grandmother’s death, to prevent him from some open expression of his impatience and disquiet. His father had given him no opportunity, though he had sought it repeatedly, for any conversation with him; he had excused him from his lessons while

the other children had again begun with theirs; and in every way had left him to himself, in a silent indifference, taking the least notice of him that he possibly could.

No other treatment could have chafed and irritated the proud boy so much as this; and all Miriam's eloquence, and all the sacred strength of her mother's name, had to be exercised at times to prevent him from recalling the promise he had made. She was going over the same arguments and pleading in the same way to-night, though she herself felt more than half discouraged and despairing. She knew it would be impossible for Laurence to live in this way much longer. The inaction, the restless suspense, the bitter sense of injury and injustice, were working him up to a sort of desperation, which could only end in some violent outbreak, if the current of feeling was not soon changed. She felt that almost any thing her father could do or say would be better than this icy indifference; and longed with a feverish impatience only second to Laurence's, for some consummation, it scarcely mattered what, of the dreary affair.

Jupe's entrance with the letters and papers from the post-office, put a stop to their conversation at last. Mr. Douglass had not come out of his study yet, so Laurence took possession of the documents to search for what might be-

long to himself or Miriam. There was a letter for him from Roger Dennis, who still lingered in Northampton, though he declared himself very lonely and bored without Laurence. Miriam had a paper, the well-beloved "Neal's Gazette," for her own share, and little May *clamored for the cluster of children's magazines* that came jointly to herself and Horace. The lion's share was for Mr. Douglass of course, and Miriam laid carefully on the centre-table, beside the lamp, the pile of papers which bore his name. There was one large business-like letter which attracted her attention ; she hardly knew why, except that she had admired the bold yet elegant style of the address. She held it in her hand a moment, and read the name of the firm stamped upon the outside, "Grinnell & Howland, shipping merchants, New York," with a sort of idle wonder as to what her father's connection with them might be.

But he came into the room a moment afterwards, and she hastened to put the letters into his hands, and light the lamp that he might read them in comfort. Busied so, she did not see the unusual eagerness with which he took up the very letter she had been examining ; or notice afterwards the strange, stern smile which curved his lip as his eyes ran over the written page. But Laurence had watched him with a keen interest, for, by a sudden unaccountable intuition,

he knew that the letter concerned him. It was not a fancy, not a suspicion, but an absolute knowledge to the boy's sharpened apprehension; and his pulse quickened into feverish rapidity in his impatience, which seemed almost unendurable, to know more, to know all and the worst, whatever it might be, without delay.

But there were no means of satisfying his excited curiosity, for Mr. Douglass had put the letter into his pocket, and was now apparently intent upon the columns of the Richmond Enquirer, lost in its discussion of the last political movement. Then came Aunt Comfort's summons to supper, and he was obliged to restrain all outward sign of his inward restlessness during the silent meal, which was so cheerless and comfortless, in spite of the abundant good things it presented. There was no sound to break the stillness except the rattle of the dishes, the children's whispering among themselves, and Miriam's occasional directions to the servants. Laurence thought it would never come to an end.

But it did, however, and Pussie's bed-time came too, in course of time, and Horace and May went off to the nursery, carrying the book and the children's magazines with them. Miriam and Laurence were left alone with their father at last.

But Miriam was unconscious of the impatient expectation in Laurence's heart. Her own was stirred with some unquiet and perturbation as she sat between the two in the silence which overhung them all; but it was nothing unusual; it had been the same thing night after night, and she did not suffer herself now to look for any unwonted break of that silence.

It startled her when her father spoke suddenly, and called her name, and her surprise was extreme when he held out, as if for her to take, the same letter which she had noticed in the evening. "Am I to read it, father?" she asked wondering, as her work dropped from her hands, and the letter lay within them.

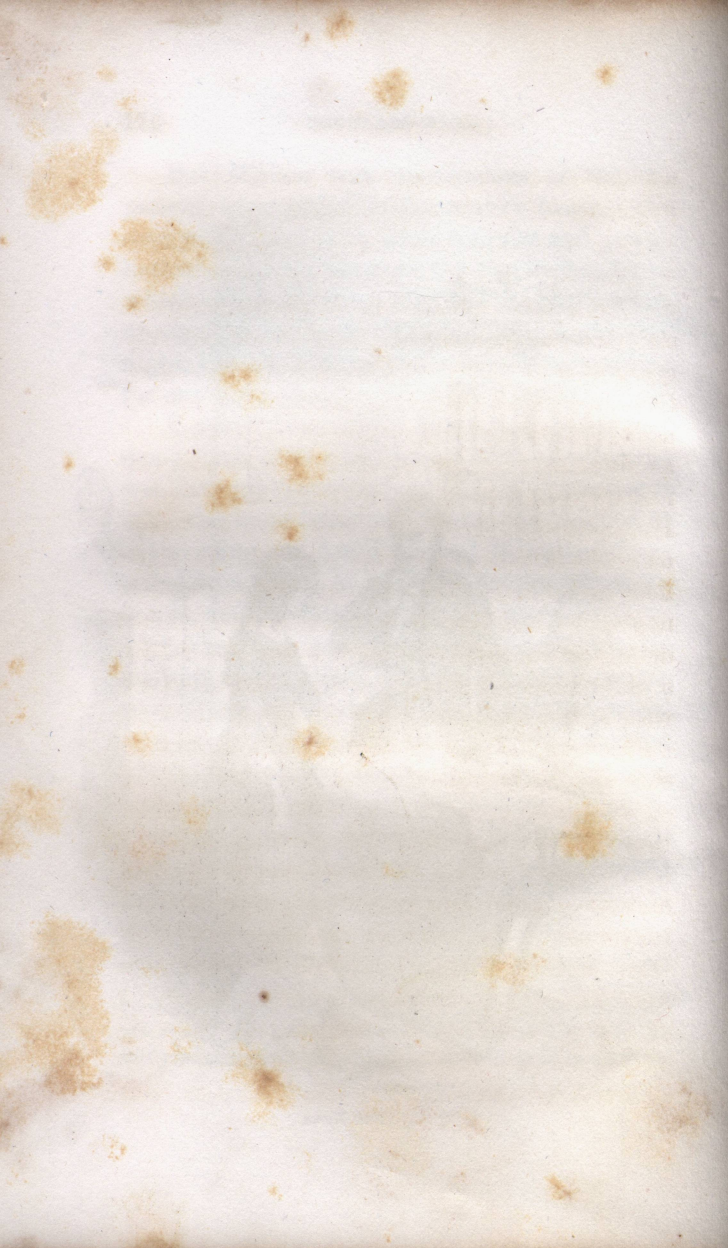
"Yes, you may read it aloud," was the answer; and Miriam, astonished and apprehensive, prepared to obey, while Laurence, whose first impulse had been to snatch it out of her hands, sat still to listen, with flashing eyes, and cheeks aglow with excitement which he no longer strove to conceal. Mr. Douglass leaned forward with a stern, composed countenance, and Miriam read:—

"DEAR SIR,—Yours of the 22d has been duly received, and your proposition with regard to your son taken into consideration. Result of which is, that we accept it cheerfully, and will receive your son into our counting-house as early as it may suit your convenience to send him. We will do all in our power



W. H. WOODS & CO.

Sad News.



to fulfil your wishes concerning him, and trust that his sojourn with us may prove satisfactory and advantageous to all parties.

“Your obedient servants,

“GRINNELL & HOWLAND.”

The letter dropped from Miriam's hands as she read the last words. Bewildered and uncomprehending, her face wore only a look of blank, surprised inquiry. Laurence caught it as it fell, and already composed into quietness as stern as his father's, read over again with minute attention the short and concise missive. He understood it all now; this was the punishment his father had prepared for him—banishment from home, and bondage to an irksome, ungenial labor. A life behind a counting-house desk, a dreary array of ledgers and day-books, a dull routine of office drudgery—and his youth was to be wasted amongst these! His youth, that was so full of ambitious dreams of scholarship and distinction!

His heart grew chill as his quick imagination pictured the life before him, and a hopeless feeling that his fate was fixed, that resistance or remonstrance would be vain and useless, overpowered and kept him dumb. Mr. Douglass had expected an outbreak of indignation and anger; remonstrance, defiance, perhaps a refusal to submit to such a disposal of himself, where his own choice or pleasure had been so entirely left out of consideration. But Lau-

rence sat silent and unmoved, his boyish face suddenly grown strangely like to his father's in its sternness and pride, and spoke no word.

Miriam, turning from one to the other in distress and perplexity, seeing the truth, and yet striving to blind herself to it, asked at last, as calmly as she could: "What does it mean, father? What do you intend to do with Laurence? You do not mean to send him away from us all, and not to college? Father!"

"He has brought it upon himself," Mr. Douglass answered coldly. "He has chosen to defy his father's authority, and forsake his father's protection; he desires in his own wonderful wisdom and experience to do battle with the world, and I show him more kindness than he deserves in opening a way for him."

"But, father!" Miriam began, with an eager entreaty in her voice.

But he would not suffer her to go on. "Be silent, Miriam," he said, "it is Laurence's place to speak for himself. What have you to say, sir, against this plan?"

"Nothing, sir." Laurence rose to his feet, and stood erect and haughty before his father. "If it is your will, I am ready to submit to it."

"Your sense of submission comes too late," Mr. Douglass returned, irritated more than he cared to have seen by the proud composure which the boy exhibited. "It is to be hoped that your

obedience will continue as exemplary, however, in the performance of the duties you will undertake."

There was a curve upon the boy's lip, scornful and bitter, but whatever words were behind it, he kept them back and made no reply. Mr. Douglass continued, after a little pause :

"Since you are *ready*, I shall expect you to be prepared to leave on Wednesday, when the boat starts for Baltimore. You will reach Baltimore in time to take the cars for Philadelphia, Thursday morning, and from there to New York the same afternoon ; so that you can enter the office of Messrs. Grinnell & Howland on the first of February. Whatever preparations you have to make must be completed to-morrow, therefore."

"Very well, sir, I shall be ready," Laurence replied steadily. "Have you any other commands with regard to it?"

"None. I will leave further directions to your employers," was the answer.

"Then I suppose I may go to my room, sir?" Laurence asked, and receiving his father's sign of permission, he walked quietly, with no appearance of excitement or emotion, out of the sitting-room. His steps did not falter, or his look change, till he had reached the shelter of his own chamber ; but when no one could look upon him, and all necessity for restraint was

removed, the pent-up passion burst forth with double force. Indignation, disappointment, impotent rage, and unavailing rebellion, swelled stormily in the boy's breast, and sent a rush of burning tears to his eyes. But he dashed them away in contempt of his own weakness, striding the floor in a fever of passion that could find no vent for its vain fury.

Miriam came to him in the midst of it, crept in softly without seeking permission, and frightened as she was at her own boldness, checked and controlled at last, by the simple power of her own loving sympathy, the evil spirit that possessed him. She had only lingered a little while with her father, to plead, to supplicate—with a boldness that she had never dared before—for a recall of his sentence, a withdrawal from the hateful engagement. But that was all vain and useless, for Mr. Douglass was immovable and implacable in his purpose. In spite of the outward calmness and self-possession, he knew well that inwardly the boy's heart, proud, ambitious, and longing for a sphere of action so different, would chafe and fret at this narrow and irksome bondage. And he felt a stern satisfaction in the thought of binding him down to it, constraining his will at least, if he could not subdue his pride.

Miriam saw it soon, and felt how unavailing was her intercession. And so she hastened to

find her brother, to speak words of comfort and hopefulness to him, if by any means she could ; and forgetting the weight that lay upon her own heart, to strive to soothe, and cheer, and lighten his. It was a hard task, for Laurence, in his impatience, would listen at first to no encouraging view of the prospect before him ; and even reproached Miriam, in his unreasoning anger, for having brought it upon him, by compelling him to stay when he would have again gone from home.

She bore even that unkindness patiently, however, and had her reward at last in seeing him grow calmer and more reconciled to the inevitable necessity. His eyes brightened from their sullen gloom after a while, into a look of interest, as she reminded him of the many things that would be new and pleasant to him in New York. The busy life in the great city, with its continual change, and excitement, and variety of character and scene, its numberless objects of interest and curiosity, its opportunities for information and experience. Even if his work were weary and distasteful, and himself longing to be at college, there would still be many a pleasant thing in the life he would lead to make compensation for that which he had lost.

“And it is not for always, either, Laurie ; I

am sure of that," Miriam said finally. "Nobody can believe that father intends you always to be shut up in a counting-house, to make a merchant or a business man, when you can be something so different. He is only vexed and angry now because so many things have come between you lately, but by and by he will send for you again, and you will go to the University yet, Laurie. Only wait and see!"

He could not be altogether gloomy and despairing under the influence of her unselfish, cheerful hopefulness. She had given too a very much brighter and pleasanter aspect to his banishment, in spite of his rejection of every alleviation; and he kissed her when they separated at last, late in the night, feeling more contented and hopeful than he had thought it possible he ever should feel again.

As for Miriam herself, she kept her own grief in her heart, till she was all alone. What blessing could come out of this she could not see yet; but she tried to believe that *light would shine yet out of all this gloom*. So far the New Year had but seemed to lead her on into deeper darkness; yet—and she felt this with unspeakable thankfulness—every additional trial had only served to strengthen her faith, to increase her dependence, and to throw her in more entire and helpless trust upon God. She was

learning to "glorify the Lord in the fires"—to say not only with her lips, but in her heart—

"For the good and the evil Thy hand hath bestowed,
I bless Thee, I thank Thee, my King, and my God!"

CHAPTER IX.

It made no little stir in the household when Laurence's speedily approaching departure was announced the next day. Little May, his favorite amongst the younger ones, refused to be comforted ; and Horace, too much of a man to cry, vented his dissatisfaction in a boyish way, by many impatient expressions. Pussie took it as a special personal aggravation and injury to herself ; and Aunt Comfort made her moan over it after her own fashion. Miriam went amongst them all, soothing and explaining, but Aunt Comfort was not to be satisfied.

“Need’n tell me nothin’ ’bout it, Miss Minnie,” she exclaimed, in uncompromising indignation. “Don’ want to hear none o’ your ’splainins ! Jes’ know Mas’ Laurie gwine to be druv away from Ole Virginny, nobody knows whar, jes’ as I allus ’spected ’twould be, some o’ dese days. Whar’s the good of havin’ a home ef you’s not ’lowed to stay dar ? I like to know dat. My blessed Marster ! I jes’



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Leaving Home

wisht some folks dats niggers now was white folks little while. Maybe somebody *I* knows would'n ketch a piece o' Comfort's tongue? Nebber min'!"

Her turban quivering with the scornful toss of her head which concluded this oration, her big bishop sleeves bustling out, and her whole ample figure swelling with wrath, Aunt Comfort sailed off to the kitchen to communicate the intelligence, with her sentiments thereon, to her sympathetic listener, Aunt Sabra. While at the same time, her hands were busied with flour and sugar and eggs, manufacturing such a store of "pound-cake" and "fruit-cake, and ginger-snaps—for Mas' Laurie to carry 'long wid him, poor cretur," as would have filled Mas' Laurie's trunk to the exclusion of every thing else, and surfeited him for a month.

Miriam meanwhile, heavy-hearted, but wearing a cheerful face, was packing Laurie's trunk with her own hands, in disregard of Minerva's entreaties to be allowed to do it. She wanted to perform this last service for him herself; and Laurie, looking on, helping and hindering her in boyish fashion, with a little flutter of anticipation and excitement in his heart, notwithstanding all his aversion to the journey, was glad that only her hands were doing this for him. He would find a memory of home and her in the neatly-packed trunk, in the clothes

put in such perfection of repair, in the score of little unthought-of comforts and conveniences tucked into every crevice, when he should open it hundreds of miles away. He had never known before how much he loved his sister; but now as he watched her light figure bending in unconscious grace over the open trunk, her soft rich curls, clustering brown and shining in her neck, her delicate face, almost too womanly and thoughtful for her girlish years, but with such an unselfish loving light in the clear dark gray eyes—he noted all with a new admiration, very proud that she was his sister, and a new strength of love which dreaded the thought of separation from her.

Miriam knew that he loved her, and that he would remember her in every chance and change of his new life with the same trustful affection. And this was her great comfort as she parted with him at last, waving her goodbye through thick-coming tears from her standing-place at the end of the long wharf; while the great, clumsy steamer “Monmouth” ploughed her way slowly out of Pungoteague creek towards the waters of the Chesapeake.

Mr. Douglass did not go down to see Laurence off: he bade him his measured farewell, with his brief words of advice, sitting in his study chair, and did not even go to the door with him. But he had consented to Miriam’s

petition that the children might go down in the carriage. So they all went together, Laurie riding on his own pretty "Nonpareil" for the last time, but keeping close to the carriage-window that he might talk to them all within.

It was a very sorrowful, lonely drive home again, when his bright face no longer looked in at the window. Even Nonpareil seemed to know there was something wrong, and jogged along under Jupe in a lagging, spiritless way, very different from his swift, springing gallop when Laurence was his rider.

And many a sorrowful, lonely day followed this; for of the little sunshine that had brightened the house since its first great shadow fell, half seemed gone now that Laurence was away. The children missed his cheerful companionship, and mourned over it continually; the servants, full of pride and love for their young master, were always longing for his return; and Miriam, to whom he was more than all the rest, yearned, with a sick heart sometimes, for the love and sympathy which she had always found with her brother, but which now there was no one to give her.

Her father went his own solitary way, living as separate from his children as if they were strangers and not his own. Miriam could never know what he thought or purposed with regard to Laurence. She kept the hope in her heart

always, that in a little while now he would be recalled. But no word or sign appeared to that effect, and she had only hope and faith to live upon. Mr. Douglass wrote to his son once every month, a brief, cold, formal letter ; and Laurence replied in the same manner. This was the only communication between them, and except when these letters were sent or received, his name was seldom mentioned in his father's presence.

Miriam's letters were very different things. Laurence poured out to her every thing that happened to be in his heart. If it were grief, or anger, or pleasure—indignation against his father—some vexation in the office—or mere despondency and weariness :—the feeling of the moment, whatever it might be, was expressed and enlarged upon to Miriam. He often forgot what he had written before the letter had reached her, and while she was troubling herself about his various grievances, they had already passed out of his mind, perhaps. She gave him true sympathy for all, however, fancied or real, and wrote him long weekly letters, full of tender affection, and little womanly counsels, mingled with items of home news about the children and the negroes ; letters that were the boy's chiefest satisfaction and consolation in his absence.

Not that he was destitute of other enjoy-

ments, however, for his life in New York furnished many that would have more than compensated to most boys for whatever was disagreeable in the routine of his business. After office-hours, he was his own master, had no one to put a restraint upon any of his actions or amusements, and with a liberal supply of spending-money—for Mr. Douglass had given Messrs. Grinnell and Howland commission to furnish him with all he needed—was considered an extremely lucky fellow by most of his new companions and acquaintances. Boylike, he was led by these, and by hasty impulses of his own impetuous disposition, into excesses and follies at times: but seldom into any actual wrong-doing. The mother-nature in him, and the mother's influence through her memory still surrounding him, kept him from many a foolish and wicked act which others with whom he came in contact committed.

Still there were many temptations in his path, and Miriam often trembled with an undefined terror for her brother, as she read his revelations of his amusements and his associates, or his confessions (for he never kept any thing from her) of some folly that he had suffered himself to be led into. Then she longed more earnestly still for the anxiously looked-for recall; but still there was no token of it. And so the time passed: winter melting into spring,

and spring flushing into summer ; and Laurence was still spending the long bright days behind his desk in the counting-house, while Miriam held her quiet sway over the household at Douglass Farm.

It was a more peaceful household now than it used to be. There was no one to irritate Mr. Douglass by rebellion or disobedience, and so there were never such discords as had jarred between Laurence and his father. Miriam by slow degrees and unwearying patience had succeeded in establishing a sort of system for the children's lessons ; a certain time and place for their studying, and something like a regular hour for their recitations. Laurie's room was metamorphosed into a school-room, and she collected the children, Horace and May and Pussie, with Lily and Geranium, who were being initiated into primer mysteries also, there every morning, and while she prepared her own lessons, overlooked theirs likewise, and gave them such assistance as was needed.

In this way the lessons grew far less terrible than they used to be, and the recitations were passed with comparatively little trouble. The summons to the library, so dreaded once, was answered confidently now, and it was but seldom that Horace and May came out disgraced by punishment, or Pussie heart-broken with a scolding. It was no trifling task for Miriam to ac-

comply all this, and required no little management; for the twins, notwithstanding they loved their sister heartily, were very much inclined to uphold each other in a mutual assumption of independence, and to "put down" Miriam if she made a show of authority.

She very seldom did this, however, but managed by her own gentleness to govern as effectually as if she had been recognized queen supreme. And for the constant self-sacrifice and self-restraint, the watchful patience and forbearance which all this required, she had her reward doubly in seeing the increasing influence for good which she possessed over her young brother and sisters, and feeling that she was in some measure supplying the place to them of the mother whom she so faithfully kept in remembrance.

Neither was Grandmamma forgotten. Miriam had missed in many a lonely hour, the little daily services which it had been her duty to render; yearned often for a look from those poor eyes which had always welcomed her coming so joyfully, and listened wistfully for an echo of the trembling voice. Her own room seemed strange and desolate for a long time, when the inner door was shut, and she could no more look out and see Grandmamma nodding in her easy-chair, or know her sleeping quietly on the bed. And for many a day the recollec-

tion of that long, motionless, trance-like slumber to which no wakening ever came, haunted her heart, and oppressed her with a host of vague and formless terrors.

But all this passed away by and by, and left only a half-sorrowful, half-pleasant memory, that Miriam loved to dwell upon. Forgetting all the querulousness and unreasonableness of her age and infirmity, only cherishing all good and happy recollections of her, and gladly picturing her in the joy of her Heavenly rest, "delivered from the burden of the flesh."

CHAPTER X.

As the summer time ripened into autumn, the year of outward mourning for her mother was passed ; and Miriam, as the oldest daughter of the family, recognized as a child no longer now, had to fulfil the womanly duties of receiving guests and paying visits in return. Mrs. Douglass had had many friends—for all yielded unconsciously to the charm of her grace and kindness, and forgetfulness of self—and the old interchange of visits began again with Miriam, herself a favorite with all who had loved her mother.

Her own relations, too, came and went again freely as of old, at Douglass Farm ; staying days and weeks together with the young housemistress, and sometimes, though not so often, taking her away with them for a like sojourn. Miriam was seldom willing to leave home for any length of time ; not that it was not pleasant to her, these visits with her light-hearted, happy

cousins, and her aunts and uncles, who were all so kind to her. She always enjoyed them heartily, and gave herself up to the freedom from care, the gaiety and merriment, so different from the stateliness and quiet of her own home, with a child's simple pleasure.

But still she resisted many an urgent invitation, and sent away many a disappointed pleader, because she would not leave her father alone in his gloom. As far as others saw, the lapse of time had made but little change from his first mood ; but to Miriam's eyes, eager, watchful, loving, there was a change ; slight and almost imperceptible, but still enough to thrill her heart with joy and thankfulness at such times as she felt it most. She saw that he was growing gradually to take a certain pleasure in her, to depend upon her for various little attentions which, unobtrusively and perseveringly, without hope of appreciation, she had been accustomed to render him, and to miss her when she was absent.

She did not know how, daily, in her sweet humility, her unconsciousness of self, her loving, cheerful devotion to others—she was growing more and more like her mother, the idol of her father's worship, and that it was this likeness, equally reflected in the grace and delicacy of her girlish beauty, which so won upon his heart through all its stern and self-absorbed reserve.

But, nevertheless, she saw that she had gained a place there at last, and not for any temptation would she have run the risk of losing it now.

The younger children, Mabel and Horace, and even Pussie too, in spite of her devotion to Minnie, were always eager to accept these invitations. And Mr. Douglass seldom made objection. So, while their holidays were spent at the Hermitage with "Uncle Edward," whose merry boys and girls always welcomed the little Douglasses with such delight, or at Cedar Grove with "Aunt Charlotte," who gave them such unequalled puddings and pies and sweetmeats in such unlimited quantities; or at Chatham Hall, where "Cousin Washington," the old bachelor of the family, but the greatest favorite with the children of all its branches, had such cabinets of shells and curiosities, and such crowds of strange and beautiful things—Miriam alone at home, gave up every pleasure, and denied every wish that could at all interfere with any possible service or attention to her father.

Through the day she saw little of him comparatively, but he always spent the evenings in the sitting-room, and she always kept her place there too. Sometimes, in those dewy, mellow autumn evenings, when the shadows of the firs and poplars lay wavering across the sea of moonlight on the lawn, and the low wind flut-

tering through the crimson and golden leaves, stirred them to such sweet and mournful music, she would far rather have been out of doors with the wind and the moonlight, wandering at the will of her own fancy, than bending over her knitting or embroidery by the light of the sitting-room lamp.

But she would not leave her father alone, and sat contentedly in her little sewing-chair, opposite his, entertaining herself with her own thoughts, and quite happy if he looked up occasionally from his book or newspaper to speak a word to her.

She always longed at these times, when he spoke kindly to her, to say something about Laurence, and speak out the petition that was continually struggling for utterance in her heart, that he might be recalled. But somehow she never seemed to get an opportunity. Trembling and frightened, in dread of his anger, and fearing that her boldness might only provoke denial, she would linger and hesitate, trying to frame some form for the speech she dared not make, until the time would be lost, and he would go back to his reading again.

So it happened again and again ; and it was in vain that Miriam reproached herself for weakness, and cowardice, and selfishness, and firmly resolved to speak at the very next opportunity. The opportunity and the courage never

came to her together, and month after month still went by, with the same interchange of formal letters between the boy and his father, but no nearer approach to union or reconciliation.

The autumn days grew shorter and colder, darkening into winter; the yellow poplar leaves whirled in drifts down the lawn, and the tall bare branches moaned and writhed in the strong December wind. It swept through the boughs of the graveyard pine with a solemn-sounding roar, like the rush and swell of stormy waves. Miriam's rose-trees, that had showered bloom and fragrance over her mother's grave through the summer-time, were sere and blossomless now, and little eddies of dead leaves went whirling amongst the hillocks and across the grassy paths.

Miriam, from her old seat in the hall-window, looked out vacantly, seeing the leaves flutter along the blast, but without thinking of them. Her thoughts—troubled and anxious ones they were—were with the letter which lay open in her lap. It was the last which Laurence had written, and its sorrowful, half-desponding tone, different from his usual indignant outbreaks and vehement impatience, saddened her inexpressibly.

"I don't know what is the reason," the letter said, "that of late I feel so hopeless and dreary; unless the weather, perhaps, has something to

do with it. It is bleak and cold, and the sky (what little of it one can see) is like lead, and full of snow-clouds, only it is too cold for the snow to fall. I keep thinking of the old blazing fires at Douglass Farm, of the sitting-room looking so warm and cheery, of the children, and most of all of you, Miriam, till I grow so homesick and heavy-hearted, that I could almost lay my head down on my account-book and blot all the entries with babyish tears.

“I do so long to see home and home-faces again, and it seems such a great while since I was there. Does father never mean to send for me, Minnie? Am I to stay here, banished and unforgiven always? I do not grow any more in love with the life of a business-man as I grow better acquainted with it, and I never can be content to adopt it for my own. I do not believe father intends it for me, either, and so I grow more and more impatient at the loss of so much time, which I think I could employ to good advantage elsewhere. You will say that I brought it all upon myself, and so I acknowledge that I did, and have deserved perhaps all that I have endured. Still I have had a long exile, Minnie, and I grow disheartened as the end seems still no nearer than before.

“Father’s letters! I almost dread to open them now, to find only the same frigid ‘satisfaction at good accounts of me from my em-

ployers'—and “hopes that my behavior will continue exemplary!’ They are models for business letters, but I am sick of the sound of business, and longing for something different from my own father. This estrangement is growing intolerable to me. Just now, in my present mood, I feel as if I could do anything desperate, if it were to continue much longer.”

The letter closed abruptly, in this way, and Miriam pondered long and sorrowfully over what was best to be done—what *she* could do—for now some step must be taken to remove this suspense which was such a weight on her own heart, and so cruel to Laurence. “I will show the letter to father; he must read it,” she concluded at last. And so, lest her courage should fail by and by, she went at once to seek admission at the study, and make the plea for her brother that must no longer be deferred.

She would not take time to hesitate, to shrink or tremble, but went into the room resolutely, and without faltering presented the letter to Mr. Douglass. “It is from Laurence, father,” she said quietly in answer to his look of surprise, “and I want you to read it, if you please.”

Mr. Douglass dropped the letter which he had already taken, answering coldly, “I do not please. I have no desire to receive through

others confidences which my son does not see fit to offer me himself."

"You never suffer him to give you his confidence, father," Miriam said deprecatingly. "He does not dare ; but if you will only read his letter, you will see how much he longs for a different feeling between yourself and him."

"Doubtless !" Mr. Douglass replied. "He has taken great pains during his absence to bring about the 'different feeling !' "

"He has been diligent and faithful and obedient, father," Miriam exclaimed eagerly. "He has had all praise from his employers, and proved his desire to please you by his unfailing good conduct. What more has he been allowed to do ?"

"Has he ever directly or impliedly acknowledged his fault, or expressed a shadow of regret or shame for all his undutiful conduct ? Has he ever written one word of penitence, one word of confession that his punishment was merited, one wish to come home and atone for the past ? Yet who has forbidden him to do all this, and more ? How has it not been allowed, except by his own obstinate pride and wilfulness ?"

"He *has* said all this to me, father," Miriam answered earnestly ; "indeed he has, and he would have said it to you if your letters had

given him any encouragement to speak what was in his heart. But they were so—you know how you have written, father!—and he could only answer them in the same way. He longs to come home—he is miserable in this separation and estrangement—and I am miserable too. I cannot bear to think of another year of it. Father, *will* you not send for Laurence, and forgive him, and love us all once more, as you used to? We are your children still, as we were when mother was here, and we have no one but you to love us, since she is gone. For her sake, do not put us away from you as you have done;—let us live in peace and love, as we did when she was with us!”

She hid her face in her hands with a burst of tears, *passionate and ungovernable*. In the flush of excitement she had spoken to her father as she had never dared to speak before, and now she had no more control over her emotion than she had over the words which came almost without volition from her lips.

Mr. Douglass looked at her in silent astonishment, but nevertheless more startled and touched by her passionate supplication than he cared to acknowledge even to himself. He made her no reply, however, but took up Laurence's letter and read it through in silence. When he had finished, he gave it back to her, saying simply,

“If you have nothing else to say, Miriam, you had better go to your room.”

And Miriam, trying vainly to regain her lost composure, obeyed him without further remonstrance, and sought her own room, where undisturbed she might weep out her excitement and distress.

CHAPTER XI.

CHRISTMAS was close at hand. The children talked of it perpetually, full of anticipations of delightful times. They had a dozen invitations for the holidays, besides the home-attractions of Aunt Comfort's unsurpassable mince-pies, and other dainties too numerous to mention, which were sure to be forthcoming. Their own candy-boiling too, (or "taffy-stew" in Accomac phraseology,) the grand one in the largest bell-metal kettle, always came on Christmas Eve. They had unlimited command of the molasses hogshead, monopoly of the great kitchen fireplace, and the whole kitchen squadron to render assistance whenever it was needed.

But the children were commanders-in-chief, and "dipped," and "stirred," and "tasted" the yellow, bubbling, foamy contents of the great boiler whenever they chose. And when the "taffy" was done at last, after many mishaps and boilings-over into the fire, through too much impatience on the part of the cooks—they

took possession of the dishes and pans, divided them into equal portions, and took each their own share to "pull" and eat, and make themselves sick with, generally, to their heart's content.

It had always been a great Christmas frolic at Douglass Farm. Miriam remembered well how eagerly she and Laurence used to anticipate it, and what merry times they always had boiling the taffy, and how their mother helped them, showing them how to pull it into white, crisp sticks, or make it up in odd little twisted baskets and platters. Last Christmas they had none, but Miriam determined that this time the children should have their old enjoyment.

Aunt Comfort was full of Christmas plans and preparations of more importance than taffy-stews. She was deep in the mysteries of sausages and souse, head-cheese and lard; for the twenty great porkers that had been fattening for slaughter half the year, were killed at last, and lay now piled one above another in the smoke-house, ready for the cutting-up and packing-down.

Miriam had been wakened in the dead of the night by the murderous uproar, the shouts of the negroes, and the screaming and "squealing" of the hapless swine. Her room was aglow with the red light of the fire and the pine torches; and looking from the window she

could see the dusky figures of the negroes leaping about amongst the flames.

There all the slaughtered hung in the morning, a goodly row, when Miriam, to please Uncle Jake, who was always master of ceremonies on such occasions, went out to look at them. There was not one of the twenty that weighed less than three hundred, and "Dick and Bess," the patriarchs of the family, Uncle Jake's special pets, weighed full six hundred pounds apiece. He had watched their growth with rapturous pride, and, in tending them from day to day, had grown as fond of the great, unwieldy, greedy creatures as if they had been children. Aunt Comfort called them "Uncle Jake's babies," and Miriam asked him laughingly how he ever had the heart to kill them.

"'Twas mighty hard work, Miss Minnie, sure 'nuff," Uncle Jake said sorrowfully. "Nebber hated to stick a knife into nothin' wus in my life, when ole Dick's time come. 'Twant no use frettin', though marster, he'lowed 'twas high time dey was killed, an' Jake had to 'bey orders. Aint dey real beauties, though, Miss Minnie! Dey aint such a pair 'tween Horu-town and Maggotly Bay, dat's my b'lief, ef I did fatten 'em my own se'f!"

"They're big enough, Uncle Jake," Miriam said laughing. "I don't see much beauty myself, though, in old Dick."

Uncle Jake was indignant: "Lor—Miss Minnie! what's you call beauty in a hog? I'se like to know! I jes' wisht Mas' Laurie was here—he'd think Dick was wuth lookin' at twice, *I* lay. When's Mas' Laurie comin' home, any how, Miss Minnie? Aint he gwine to be here for Christmas?"

"I can't tell yet, Uncle Jake," Miriam answered; "I don't know whether he will be able to get home for Christmas or not. You must wait till Christmas comes."

And to escape further questioning which she would not know how to answer, Miriam turned away from Uncle Jake and the objects of his admiration, and walked back to the house. It was a continual trouble to her of late to answer all the inquiries about Mas' Laurie. Every negro on the farm, from Uncle Jake and Aunt Comfort, past Lily and Geranium, down to little George Washington and his sister Bell Ellen Victoria, who had not emerged from the "quarter" yet, were wanting to know "when Mas' Laurie was coming home." And Miriam, who would gladly have told them if she had only known herself, had to evade the questions of why and wherefore, as best she could.

In the kitchen Aunt Comfort, with her sleeves rolled up, and a cleaver in her hand, chopping in pieces the pink and white squares of pork, assailed her with the same subject.

"I say, Miss Minnie, I'se makin' des sossages for Mas' Laurie, jes' de way he likes 'em, partic'ler. Is he gwine come home to eat 'em? I wan' to know."

"He'll have to bring half New York along with him, Aunt Comfort, to help him, if he is to eat all that;" Miriam answered with a laugh. But Aunt Comfort was not to be turned aside in that way.

"I wants nothin' to do wid no New York," she said, bringing down her cleaver with indignant emphasis upon the bit of pork before her. "I'se 'quirin' 'bout Mas' Laurie, an' I wan' to know ef he's comin' home or *not*, dis Christmas. Jes' you tell me dat, Miss Minnie."

"Then I must tell you more than I know, Aunt Comfort, as you have heard me say a great many times before;" Miriam answered quietly. "I wish you would not ask me again, and if you knew how much you troubled me by your talking and complaining, I think you would stop it and say no more about Laurie to me."

"My groshus, Miss Minnie! I can hold *my* tongue!" Aunt Comfort exclaimed, tossing her head in high disdain. "Fust time I'se ben told to do it, though, dis many a year. Mistis wan't used to shut me up dat fashun, an' I nebber 'spected it from none o' her child'en. Nebber

min', though, 'taint no matter; I'se nobody but Comfort—poor ole no 'count nigger!"

"You know I do not think any such thing, Aunt Comfort," Miriam exclaimed quickly, laying her hand on Aunt Comfort's arm to stop the noise of the cleaver, which in her indignation she was plying furiously, sending stray bits of sausage-meat right and left through the air. "You say what you please to me, you know, and I never yet told you to hold your tongue. But this constant fretting about Laurie worries and troubles me more than I can tell you, when I have already enough trouble on my heart on his account. And I thought if you knew it once you would stop it. That was all I meant, and you have no reason to be vexed or hurt, or to call yourself any such names."

Aunt Comfort made no answer, and outwardly refused to be conciliated, because she would not acknowledge herself in the wrong. But in her heart she was sorry, and determined that she would not again yex Miss Minnie with any questions or remarks on the subject. A determination which she kept so well that Miriam had comparative peace from the servants afterwards.

But the children talked of Laurie continually as Christmas drew nearer, and Miriam was sorely tried many a time to satisfy them that it would be all right and proper, and they must

not complain, even if Laurie did not come home for the holidays. The incessant "why? why?" that took so many forms, was very hard to answer without in some measure blaming her father, which she never allowed herself to do.

For herself, she hoped still that the letter would have its effect upon her father, though outwardly he gave no sign of concession. The subject had never been alluded to between them since that afternoon, and she could not know what was his determination. She did not dare to speak again. And so the days went by till there were only six before Christmas.

It was Sunday, the day for afternoon service at Pungoteague. The rector of St. George's had charge of the church at Bellhaven also, and there was but one service in the day therefore, for each, alternating morning and afternoon. Even these were but sparsely attended, however, for the good people of Accomac in those days were by no means exemplary church-goers.

There were a few vehicles; a single family carriage, two or three gigs and curricles, and a stray cart or two, in front of the church, when the carriage from Douglass Farm drove up. A little group of gentlemen were gathered round the door, for service had not yet begun, and inside knots of ladies, standing around the stove, or at the pew-doors, talked together in subdued

voices. Miriam knew them all, and all greeted her kindly as she passed on to her own pew, a broad, square, high-backed enclosure, like all the rest without carpet, or cushion, or footstool, and which certainly would never tempt one to sleep, however soporific the sermon might happen to be.

It was an odd, clumsy old church, and is yet, for its time-worn, weather-stained, sombre brick walls still defy age and decay. It is built in the form of the old Greek cross, divided inside simply by two aisles crossing each other; and the floor unevenly paved with brick, over whose hollows and hills heedless feet get many a stumble. It has been said to be the oldest church in America, it is at least the oldest in Virginia; and therefore beautiful through its venerable antiquity, in spite of its clumsy architecture and utter lack of adornment.

Miriam loved every stone in the old church : Sabbath after Sabbath from her earliest childhood had been spent within it, till it seemed like another home to her ; and many an hour of sweet comfort and peace had been hers, as she sat there a timid, humble listener to the Word of Life. This afternoon, with her anxious sorrow in her heart, she listened eagerly for a word of strength and consolation ; and many were given her. Tears came to her eyes many a time, loving and happy tears, as chant-

ed psalm, or fervent prayer, or chosen text spoke each in passing its own message to her heart. Even the sermon seemed written for her, so full of comfort and counsel was it. Its text, taken from the morning lesson, was:—

“Be careful for nothing ; but in every thing, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.”

Miriam remembered what followed it directly:—

“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

And for the time, she felt as if she could indeed cast all her care on Him who careth for us, and give herself up to the full possession of that peace so precious and so unspeakable. She did not know, poor child, what urgent need she would soon have for all the faith, and courage, and comfort which her heart could contain. But God had given her strength against her time of want.

The sermon over, and the benediction—in which the words that had dwelt in her mind all the afternoon were spoken aloud—uttered, Miriam holding Pussie by the hand, and striving to keep Horace and May from straying off to speak to every body in church, followed her father to the carriage. She heard him tell Uncle Jake, as he lifted her in, to drive round to

the post-office, and her heart beat quickly at the thought of getting, perhaps, a word from Laurence ; a possibility which she had forgotten till now in the fulness of other emotions.

The Northern mail came in always on Sunday afternoons ; generally about the closing of service ; and every body stopped after church to collect whatever might belong to them. Mr. Douglass had generally the largest portion of the mail for his own share ; and the postmaster came out of the little office as the carriage drew up before it, holding in his hands all ready, the usual bundle of letters and packages. Miriam stretched out her hands involuntarily as she recognized in the distance Laurie's well-known writing on one of the envelopes. But her father put the letter, with the rest, quietly into his pocket, and then she knew, with a little pang of disappointment, that it was not for her.

She overcame it presently, and fell to wondering what Laurence could have written to his father. His regular letter in reply to Mr. Douglass's monthly despatch had arrived as usual early in the month ; and what could this additional message be ? She had more than once entreated him to write to her father such a letter as he had never written yet, confessing that he had been wrong, and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Heretofore he had refused indignantly to do any such thing ; but now could it be that

he yielded at last? that this letter was the expression of his penitence and humility?

She could not keep the thought out of her heart; it kept her fluttering with nervous apprehensions, half hoping, half fearing, through all the drive home, and the distance from Pungoteague had never seemed so long to her restless impatience. It was a relief to be at home at last; her father would then read the letter, and she must soon know its contents, and whatever effect they would produce.

She went to her own room, and tried to wait patiently, and calm her excited expectation by recalling the church service, the sermon and the text which had so strengthened and sustained her. "Father, help me to be careful for nothing," she said inwardly, "to trust Thee whatever the day may bring forth, make me strong through faith in Thee."

But even this scarcely availed to quiet her restless anticipation and suspense. She chided herself vainly for it, and tried uselessly to read or employ herself in some way that would make her forget the letter and all its consequences. It was an idle effort; she was watching, listening, waiting all the while, with an eager apprehension that she could neither restrain nor account for.

She could bear it no longer at last, and with

a sudden determination to go to her father, and never leave him till she knew all his purpose with regard to her brother, she left the room and went down stairs.

CHAPTER XII.

THE sitting-room was deserted; neither her father nor the children were there, and Miriam did not stop, but passed on to the study. She knocked for admission, but no answer came and then she called "Father!" but still there was no response; although she heard him within, walking heavily across the floor.

"May I come, father?" she asked again; and when her petition was still unheeded, she opened the door herself at last, and went in. For she was alarmed, she scarcely knew why, and a vague dread of some calamity chilled her heart. Her father's appearance did not serve to reassure her: he was walking up and down the room with staggering, aimless steps, and his face was white with a dumb agony such as Miriam had never seen pictured there before.

She came to him in terror: "Father, what is the matter? why do you look so? Has any thing happened to Laurence? For pity's sake, tell me!" she exclaimed wildly.

But he shook off with a fierce gesture her

hands that strove to hold him, and again strode blindly across the room, speechless and despairing.

Miriam sprang to his side, clung to his arm, desperate with this agony of suspense : " Father ! you must, you shall speak to me ! " she said, almost imperiously. " What harm has happened to Laurence ? Tell me at once, father ! "

Then he looked down at her, seeming for the first time to be actually aware of her presence. His lips opened with an effort to speak, but their only utterance was a groan of unspeakable misery.

" He is dead ! My son ! my son ! " the words broke forth at last in a cry terrible to hear ; and the stern, proud, unyielding man, giving way to the passion of woe that succeeded his first anguish, bowed down his head and covered his face in an abandonment of grief that was fearful to witness.

Dead ! Miriam's heart stood still ; life, and sense, and feeling seemed fleeting away from her, leaving no consciousness but of that fearful word ringing and echoing in her brain. Dead—Laurence—her brother !

She staggered to a chair and sat down, pressing her temples tightly in both hands, for her head seemed bursting with its throbbing pain. She did not see her father in his stormy remorse and grief, or hear his strong, heaving

sobs resounding through the room. All sensation was concentrated in one overwhelming consciousness of the desolation which had laid waste her heart by a word. How, or when, or where it had happened, it did not occur to her to question, or even to doubt for a moment the actual certainty of her loss. She comprehended in a word the full sum of her misery, and accepted it mutely and unresisting.

By and by, when the paralyzing effect of the first shock had passed, her mind began to seek evidence and proof, and a sudden ray of relief brightened it in the hope of a possible misunderstanding. Laurence's letter—where was it? She went to her father, who sat still bowed down in his woe, knelt beside him, and wound her arms around his neck. She had never dared to give him such a caress since, as little children, she and Laurence sat together on his knee. But now it was involuntary, she must come to him. Neither did he resist it: he drew her to him instead, clasped his arms about her with a tenderness never before manifested, but which now softened Miriam's strained and aching heart to tears, the first she had shed since she entered the room.

They wept together silently in their mutual sorrow for a moment. Then Miriam lifted her head, asking brokenly:

“Father, is it truly so? Is there no hope?”

“None,” he answered with a groan, and her heart sank with the feeling of a new blow.

“Will you tell me about it?” she asked again after a little while, making an effort to be very calm. “Tell me how it happened, and what his letter said. He wrote to you, father?”

Mr. Douglass pointed to his desk without speaking, and Miriam went to it to seek the letter. It lay there unfolded, and beside it was a newspaper also open. Miriam took up the letter, and read it through with fast-falling tears. It was even as she had anticipated, Laurie’s confession to his father, his acknowledgment of wilful and undutiful behavior, and with his expression of sorrow and pledge of future submission, a pleading petition—not to have his punishment withdrawn—but that his father would accept his penitence, believing it sincere, and consent to give him afterwards the love and sympathy which he craved from his only parent. Laurence’s best and noblest self spoke in every line of the earnest, manly epistle; and Miriam’s heart glowed with loving pride even while her tears fell so fast and bitterly.

She read it through to the end, however, without finding any ground for her father’s assertion of his death. There was no postscript, no message upon the outside, no sign whatever about the letter to tell that the writer was no longer in existence. And bewildered and per-

plexed, she turned to her father for the solution of a mystery so painful.

He had only waited for her conclusion of the letter, to furnish it, and directed her attention to the newspaper which lay beneath her hand. There she saw upon its very first page, in large, distinct letters, the words, "*Terrible Railroad Accident.*" And then she knew! It was with a strong effort that she repressed the wild cry which sprang to her lips, "Laurence has been killed!" But she kept it down, and quivering in every nerve with the sick horror, ran over the long column of details before her. At last, after hurrying past scenes of terror and agony which at any other time would have appalled her, but which now in her trembling excitement she gave no thought to, she reached this paragraph:

"Amongst the unclaimed and unrecognized bodies, is one of a youth apparently sixteen or seventeen years old, tall and slight, with dark, curling hair, and regular, finely-cut features. He was well-dressed, and evidently belonged to the better class of society, but no letters or papers about his person gave evidence of his name or residence. The only clue to his identity was found in an antique seal-ring on his left hand, upon which the initials '*L. D.*' were engraved. His body awaits the recog-

nition of his friends, in company with several others yet unclaimed."

The paper fell from her hands, there was no need to read more. The tall, slender figure, the curling hair and beautiful features, described Laurence but too well ; and the ring, the antique seal with the graven initials, *that* had been her grandfather's. Laurence, bearing his name, had worn it for years, ever since his boyish finger had been able to retain it. It was indeed her brother who lay dead, unrecognized, uncared-for, far away from his home and the many loving hearts that had so yearned for his coming. Never, never would he come again !

Mr. Douglass had watched her keenly as she read, his look of eager attention changing gradually to one of disappointment and despair, as he marked the expression of anguish and utter hopelessness on her face. Almost unconsciously he had been cherishing the idea that she would see some cause for doubt, some reason why the unknown body should be another than her brother's ; but she too yielded to the irresistible certainty !

Miriam was the first to break the dreary silence that fell between them. She went back to her father, and knelt by his side again, as he sat in his gloomy wretchedness. In the midst of her own grief, she longed to say some word of hope or consolation to him, for never had she

seen him so crushed, so heart-broken. But what could she say? She bent her head a moment in passionate supplication, for strength, for faith, for patience; and then the afternoon's text, forgotten till now, came suddenly back to her remembrance, recalling a portion of the comfort it had first brought her.

She looked up to her father, holding his passive hand in hers. "After all," she said, "perhaps there is some mistake, father. How can we tell? It might so easily be made! The description could answer for many another, and even the ring might belong to an entirely different person. They were only initials, you know; and we have no reason to think that Laurence was on his way home. His letter says nothing like it."

His letter has been delayed," Mr. Douglass answered gloomily. "It should have reached me ten days ago. He despaired of a reply to it, I suppose, and so determined to come home without it. But he will never come home, we shall never see him again."

Miriam looked at the letter; it was dated on the seventh, scarcely a week after she had received the sorrowful and desponding one which she had shown to her father. Since then he had not written to her at all, and now their latest intelligence of him was thirteen days old. There was nothing in the letter that could prove

one thing or another. As his father had supposed, he might, in despair of an answer to it, have made a sudden resolve to come home unsummoned. It was in keeping with Laurence's usual impetuous action.

Still she would not be discouraged; the very effort to cheer her father had inspired herself with an actual hope, and she clung to it with eager persistence.

"The letter proves nothing, father," she said earnestly, after a moment's pause; "and we must hope for the best till the worst is proved. Indeed we have no right to despair yet; there is no certainty whatever in this information, even if we knew that Laurence had been on this very train. There might be others who would suit the description as well. Besides we have no right to suppose him there, when, perhaps, he has never left New York at all!"

Her earnest words—which almost convinced herself as she spoke them—had their effect upon her father. The settled gloom of his face lightened for a moment.

"It is true," he said, half incredulously, half hopefully; "and you may be right, Miriam. God grant that you are! But this suspense is intolerable. What is to be done? There is no way to reach Baltimore before Thursday morning, and I could not get to New

York till late in the night. Four whole days to wait! It will madden me!"

"There is another way, father," Miriam answered quickly. "Go down to Northampton, and cross over to Norfolk in the boat which leaves on Tuesday. You will get to Norfolk the same evening, you know, and then you can telegraph to New York, and find out if Laurence is there, Tuesday night, or at latest Wednesday morning."

"Truly!" Mr. Douglass exclaimed, almost joyfully. "I did not think of that, Miriam. It will save two days at least. But two days still to wait!" and the agonized expression again came back to his face. "Two days to imagine all the horror of his death! How shall I ever endure it! Laurence—my son!"

His hands clasped tightly together, his rigid colorless features, told more plainly than passionate outcry the anguish of his suffering. And Miriam forgot her own in her bitter yearning to soothe his.

"Laurence will come home, father; I believe it, I know it!" she cried excitedly; and at that moment her faith was indeed strong that her brother would again be restored to them. "God will bring him back to us; He will not leave us so desolate."

But Mr. Douglass answered bitterly, "It is only right that I should be desolate! How have

I deserved that he should be restored to me? I sent him from me—I have never been a father to him—or to you, Miriam. Why do you cling to me? How have you kept any love in your heart for such a father?"

Miriam threw her arms around him. "Father! father! do not speak so—I cannot endure it. If you will only love us as you used to, we will all love you *so much*—with our whole hearts! Laurence has told you so in his letter, and he will come back still to tell you with his own lips."

She clung to him with no fear now, feeling only compunction and remorse that she had ever had a bitter or angry thought concerning him. And he, touched and moved as he had never been before, strained her to his heart silently, with such a caress that made Miriam for the moment forget every sorrow in the thrilling delight of her father's love.

And though the present grief came back only too soon, with its suspense, its terror, its anguish unspeakable in the thought that her worst fear might be true; still, through all, she gave thanks to God for this opening and awakening of her father's heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE was weeping and wailing in the house, and lamentation that refused comfort, when the bitter tidings were made known. It was Miriam's hard task to tell the children, in the midst of their merry Christmas anticipations, what mourning was perhaps in store for them instead of the mirth and happiness they looked for. She tried to tell them gently and calmly, and make them understand that there was no certainty yet; it was only a terrible fear, and perhaps after all might be proved groundless. But with the prodigal grief of childhood, that in its first abandonment will accept no consolation or alleviation, they would only believe the worst at once. And Laurence was mourned for as one for whom there was no hope.

Mabel cried incessantly, and would neither eat nor sleep, until she was fairly sick and exhausted with her violent emotion. Horace and Pussie clung sobbing to Miriam, and the servants came around her, each making his own lamentation for Mas' Laurie; till Miriam was

fain to put away her remembrance of her own share of sorrow in the necessity for soothing all these.

She kept with her father as much as possible through the day in which he had to wait at home, before he could start for Norfolk. He seemed to depend upon her for every thing ; and it was strange to see her, so timid and ill-assured usually, directing, comforting, and encouraging him now with such confidence. It was stranger still to see him submitting to her ; but the child was stronger than the man now, and all his hope and courage seemed to come from the quiet strength of her faith and patience.

As for herself she scarcely knew how she lived through the day ; so heavily her own burden pressed upon her sometimes that she could have cried out in despair and anguish, at the very time that she was speaking words of hope and trust to her father, or striving patiently to soothe the tumultuous grief of the children. It was only in forgetting herself entirely, acting as though she could only work, and think, and feel for others, that she was able to bear up and keep strong and cheerful for all. For it was not her real nature ; and even while she said to others, " He is not dead, he will come back to us ! "—her own heart was sadly incredulous and unbelieving.

But she had won an ever present help in

time of trouble, and she was sustained and enabled to wait patiently for the end.

Mr. Douglass went down to Northampton very early next morning. He could scarcely wait for daylight in his restless impatience; and Miriam was thankful when he was gone, for there seemed then some nearer prospect of learning the truth. Nothing, it seemed to her, not even the confirmation of their worst fears, could be so hard to bear as this wearing suspense. And for those who remained at home, there must still be four days of it to endure; for even if her father's telegraph should be answered at the earliest possible moment, there was no way for him to transmit the intelligence until he himself returned in the boat on Friday.

Miriam sickened at the thought for a moment, as she for the first time realized it fully. Then a comforting word stole into her heart—*"As thy day, so shall thy strength be;"* and her heart answered back, *"Even so, Lord."*

She turned away from the window, where she had been watching her father's gig as it rolled swiftly down the avenue, and encountered Aunt Comfort, who had been looking over her shoulder for the same purpose.

"Whar's de good?" she began indignantly, as if she could no longer restrain herself;—"what's de sense o' goin' arter him *now*? Better sen' for him when he was 'live, better

not druv him 'way no how! No use fotchin' him home now, an' he dead an' gone. Thank de Lord, mistis aint livin' to see dis day? I know'd jest how 'twas gwine to be, from de time I saw Mas' Laurie startin' off from dis house. I know'd I'd nebber sot my eyes on him 'gen; an' *ef* I don't, I prays de blessed Lord 'll nebber let me look at marster no more! I prays an' hopes nebber to see him here 'gen, 'dout Mas' Laurie comes 'long wid him, safe an' well! De Lord abuv, he knows I prays it!"

She was pale with passion as she made these vehement wishes, and Miriam, astonished and distressed, scarcely knew how to stop her. "You *must* not talk so, Aunt Comfort," she began earnestly; but it was no use, Aunt Comfort was not to be stayed in the swell of her wrath.

"I'se gwine to say what I please dis time," she exclaimed excitedly, "I sha'nt hold my tongue for none o' your tellin', Miss Minnie. I aint gwine to set still, and see Mas' Laurie, my own boy, 'bused, an' druv away, an' killed, an' nebber say a word! I aint gwine to stan' it, no how. Please God, I'll run away, I'll nebber stay 'nother night on dis place arter I'se sure 's Mas' Laurie's dead. I nebber will, de Lord hears me!"

Sobbing wildly in her excitement, grief, and indignation, she went swelling away to the

kitchen; and as far as Miriam could hear her, she was declaring, "I'se run away, I'se neber stay an' call him marster no more, ef he does come back widout my boy!"

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday! How heavily and drearily the days dragged by, that were to have been so full of employment and preparation. There was nothing doing, nothing done, upon the place; the very field-hands were infected with the general sense of calamity, and loitered about the house and grounds at all hours of the day, idle and out of bounds; but no one hindered them. Every now and then a wistful face would look in upon Miriam, and ask—

"Haint heard nothin' 'bout Mas' Laurie to-day, has you, Miss Minnie?" and go away sorrowfully again at the often-repeated negative. It was a trial to Miriam, and in a certain sense a comfort also. It was pleasant to know how much every one loved him, how sincerely all mourned for him.

It was not only the servants either who shared the sorrow of the lonely children. The news spread abroad over the country soon, and many were the tokens of loving sympathy and compassion which they received. It brought its alleviation of course; but still the long, weary suspense, the torturing alternations of hope and fear, the cold despair that would in

spite of every effort settle at times upon her heart, seemed to Miriam almost unendurable. How shall I live through another day like this? was her thought, as each day crept by with a weight upon every hour. And the long nights when, even if she slept, the same thoughts and images wandered through her dreams, brought her little more rest. She lay awake many an hour, listening to the wind as it cried around the house with its shrill wild voice, or the rain, that fell one night, ceaselessly, with a dull, heavy, monotonous dropping; till this almost seemed to make her wild, so many were the haunting terrors they woke into life.

Friday came at last; Christmas eve, and the day for her father to return from Norfolk. It was just possible that he might reach home the same night. The weather was clear and calm, and there was nothing to delay the boat from making a quick trip across the bay. If he reached Cheirton by night-fall, Miriam knew that he would take the long drive of twenty-five miles in the darkness, rather than keep her in suspense till the next day.

It was the most anxious, restless day of all: a constant strain of expectation, watchful, eager, unceasing. Every sound startled her, every rattle of wheels made her spring to door or window with a thrill of anticipation; though all the while she knew how vain it was, how im-

possible that any tidings could reach her before the late hours of the night, if even then.

But she was not alone in this. Aunt Comfort was perpetually flying out of the house, and straining her eyes to look down the road, in search of some vehicle that never came. Then she would come back again, calling herself an "ole fool" under her breath, but making aloud some ingenious excuse for her sudden movement, so unlike the usual dignity of her gait. Uncle Jake, who was to go down to Northampton to bring back his master, had harnessed up at daybreak, and started off, full two hours earlier than there was any need for going. Aunt Sabra busied herself in cooking every thing eatable that she could lay her hands on, "for marster's supper;" and "marster's supper" was in preparation the whole day.

Miriam wandered over the house, trying to find a vent for her restlessness in arranging and rearranging the various rooms which were to receive the absent ones. She made Jupe keep up a blazing fire in her father's chamber, and Laurie's, all day; and she herself placed every thing in both rooms in most delicate order. She could not ornament them with Christmas evergreens, as she had always been accustomed to; those emblems of mirth and happiness would have mocked her grief. Neither were there any Christmas wreaths in the sitting-room,

where in years past the cedar-branches with their blue berries, and the shining myrtle, and dark holly-leaves with their beautiful crimson clusters, had festooned the walls, and decorated every thing with their gay profusion.

She could not bear to see them now, while such a shadow hung over this Christmas time. But she made the room bright and cheerful nevertheless, with its glowing fire, its furniture grouped in cosy arrangement, and its many articles of familiar household use lying around. And then when she had done all that she could find to do, she wandered about still from one room to the other, wondering sadly if ever Laurie would take his old place by the fireside and the evening lamp down stairs, or lay his head again upon the white pillows of his own bed, which her hands had smoothed with such dainty care for him.

Little May followed her about, pale and silent, but inwardly full of feverish excitement; and Lily and Geranium haunted Pussie's footsteps more like shadows than ever. They would not have been left alone a minute for worlds, so full of vague terrors and dreads were the silly little hearts.

So the day passed with the unquiet household at Douglass Farm, and the evening came at last, deepening into twilight and darkness. It was in vain that Miriam told the children

there was no possibility of their father's return until late in the night, and that perhaps he would not come at all ; in vain that she urged them to eat the supper which was spread before them, and then go to bed and sleep in peace till Mr. Douglass came back. She promised faithfully to call them then, but they could not be persuaded, and insisted upon sitting up for themselves. So the untasted supper was left, and they all gathered together in the sitting-room, that lay warm and bright in the red glow of the fire.

Miriam left them there after a while, when Aunt Comfort had come in to keep them company, and betook herself to her favorite seat in the hall-window. It was dark and chilly, but the solitude and the gloom were what she longed for now, to cool the fever of excitement which burned in all her veins. She leaned her forehead against the window-pane, and asked in her heart to be forgiven for impatience and rebellion, to be strengthened for whatever trial of her faith awaited her, and made submissive, patient and thankful, in any event that should befall.

She felt better after this, as she always did ; heart and brain alike were calmed and comforted ; but she still kept her seat in the window. She remembered the night when she had sat here nearly a year ago, alone as now with

her sorrowful thoughts, and the great temptation which had come to her soul then. And recalling all the events of the year, its sorrows and trials and struggles, she could see how gently she had been led on from one to another, and how the promises of strength and encouragement spoken to her then in the hour of her despondency, had been fully verified ; for every trouble had brought its own blessing, and taught its own lesson. Even this last and greatest of all, had it not brought forth sweet fruit already ? It had softened her father's heart, broken down the barriers of pride and sternness which had separated him so long from his children's love, and filled him with penitence and tenderness, as no other grief had ever done.

And even if they must indeed drain this full cup of suffering, they would doubtless find new sweetness in it still. At least she could never again be separated from her father as she had been, his heart was open to her now, it could not be closed again. And his love and God's tender mercy could reunite the family chain, notwithstanding the lost and broken links.

She did not know how long she lingered in the window-seat, absorbed in these thoughts, and struggling to bring all "into subjection to His will." The first thing that aroused her was a sound of voices from the sitting-room, a sud-

den outcry, a rush of feet, and then a confused murmur, as of many tongues all speaking together. The whole length of the hall lay between her and the sitting-room, so that in the distance she could distinguish nothing clearly ; but she was startled into wonder and apprehension by the sounds. They had been so quiet before, what could it mean now ? ”

Was it her father ? *Could* he have returned ? She sprang to her feet as the thought flashed lightning-like into her mind ; but the excited motion sent a rush of blood to her brain, which so blinded and sickened her that she could not stir, but faint and trembling, was obliged to cling to the window for support. Still the sounds increased—and now she could distinguish voices and words—the shouts of the children—and her own name called. “ Where is Miriam ? Minnie ! Minnie ! ” was the cry ; and then the sitting-room door was thrown widely open, a flood of light fell across the darkness, and a troop of eager figures hurried out into the hall, and hastened joyfully towards her.

Miriam sprang forward with one wild leap—how she never knew, for all consciousness vanished when she reached the shelter of the arms that she knew so well. Not her father’s—no ! but Laurence himself, verily alive, and

no ghost, held her tightly to his breast, raining tears and kisses over her face, and with a thousand loving words striving to recall her to sense and animation again.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was an easy task, for the light could not long be absent from Miriam's eyes after this joy had come back to her heart. She was soon able to look up, and assure herself that her happiness was indeed real and no dream; to return Laurie's lavish caresses, and join the rest in a shower of questions as to the how, and when, and wherefore, of his most unexpected arrival.

The whole house was in an uproar; the children were half crazy, Lily and Geranium danced about in ecstasies, and Aunt Comfort, in the excess of her feelings, perfectly overwhelmed Laurence, and enveloped him in the most ample of embraces.

"Oh, Mas' Laurie, honey, Lord bress you! Lor! bress you!" she kept repeating over and over again, hugging the tall boy to her bosom, while he, laughing, struggled vainly to free himself. "I'se glad to see dis day, Mas' Laurie—sure 'nuff I nebber 'spected to hug my boy

'gen! Bress God! Thank de Lord! I'se so happy I could die shoutin' glory dis minnit!"

It was not only Aunt Comfort either; the news had spread already from one end of Douglass Farm to the other, and the negroes were pouring into the hall and sitting-room, wild with joy and eagerness, thronging round Mas' Laurie to shake hands with him, and "God *bress* him," in the fervor of their delight; until Laurence declared that he should positively be smothered if he were not speedily delivered from their hands!

Upon which Aunt Comfort, swelling with a double accession of dignity and self-importance, took it upon herself to clear the room, and bore down upon the open-mouthed, staring groups with all the majesty of her authority.

"Cl'ar out, all you niggers, now," she said emphatically, adding the energy of action to her words. "Mas' Laurie can't git no chance to see his own fambly for all you wide-moufed darkies jammin' up de room. Ain't you got no breedin', none o' you? Go 'long wid you, I say. You bin said 'nuff dis time to last till to-morrow, so jes' git out wid yourselves."

"Never mind," Laurence called after them, as the crowd retreated, not very willingly, before their mistress; "I'll come and see you all to-morrow, and bring Christmas with me, too. Good-night, and merry Christmas to you now!"

"Thankee, Mas' Laurie ! Lord bress you ! Spec' we'se all hab merry Christmas dis time sure 'nuff, now you'se got back !" was responded in full chorus, and then Aunt Comfort shut the door upon them impatiently, and hurried off herself likewise to get some hot supper ready right away. As Aunt Sabra had done nothing else all day but cook this said supper, it was soon forthcoming ; and Laurie did it ample justice, declaring, to Aunt Sabra's infinite delight and pride, that he had never seen a supper equal to it since he went away from Douglass Farm.

The excitement was quieted at last, however, and Miriam and Laurence were left alone together in the sitting-room. Aunt Comfort was in the kitchen, telling to a large auditory the particulars of Mas' Laurie's arrival, "how he cum in like a ghost," and her sensations thereupon. The children, too, had been prevailed upon to go to bed, for it was long past their usual time ; and the brother and sister were left together finally, to exchange without interruption the mutual confidences and histories which each longed to hear.

"How was it that you happened to come, after all, Laurie ?" Miriam asked, as she took her seat upon a cushion at his feet, while he threw himself back in a great arm-chair, lazily enjoying the glow and warmth of the oak fire.

"I haven't half understood your explanations, there has been such a whirl all the evening."

"And your comprehension hasn't been particularly clear this evening, either," Laurie returned laughing. "You have been perfectly bewildered and confounded, Minnie—the idea of your fainting at sight of me!"

"I could not help it, Laurie," Miriam said softly. "It was like a resurrection of the dead to me. I had been thinking and praying for so long, alone in the darkness, trying to become resigned and willing never to see you alive again. And then, when it seemed at last that I *could* bear it, if it was God's will—I heard the noise of the children, and then the sound of your voice, and then I saw *you*, your own living self, Laurie, standing before me! I can't remember what I did or felt after that. It was such a shock of joy that I could not bear it all at once."

Laurence clasped her hands fondly, as he answered gravely, "It is such a strange thought to me that you all believed me dead! While I was longing to get home, and fretting with impatience at the delays I encountered, father was gone in search of me, and you were mourning over my death! It never once occurred to me that there could be such a state of things."

"Did you hear nothing about the railroad accident?" Miriam asked. "Surely you must

have seen the accounts of any thing so terrible!"

"Certainly," Laurence exclaimed, "I knew all about it, but never thought that any one else would connect me with it in any way. I thought of it myself often enough, with such thankfulness as you will understand, when I tell you that only the merest accident prevented me from leaving New York in that very train!"

"Laurie!" Miriam shuddered, as she exclaimed involuntarily, but he went on:

"It was on the Camden and Amboy line, you know, that the collision took place. I travelled that way when I first went to New York, so when I determined suddenly to start home, after I got no answer to my letter, I took a fancy that I would go by the Jersey City train, merely for the novelty. And I did, and left the city in it on the very day of the accident. When I reached Philadelphia, the news of it had already gone before us! I read the particulars of it afterwards, and saw the very paragraph which you thought was meant for me; only the initials were different, I think it was 'L. B.' instead of 'D' in the paper which I read. But, of course, I did not imagine what effect it was going to have, for I had not told you or father that I was coming home."

"But your letter was delayed so long,"

Miriam said. "It only came at the same time with the news of the accident ; and the paragraph described you so unmistakably it seemed to us—your name and your ring, Laurie!—that father and I both concluded you had grown tired of waiting for an answer and the permission to come, and had determined hastily to come without it."

"It is strange !" Laurence answered thoughtfully, "what a Providence guides our simplest actions. I resolved to come just as you had imagined I would, impatiently and wilfully ; and my journey might have ended so fearfully ! Thank God, who directed my paths in such mercy !"

His voice trembled, and Miriam, who never had heard him speak in this way before, could only for answer press his hand more lovingly, as she turned away her face to hide her glad and thankful tears. He spoke again less gravely after a little pause.

"That was more than a week ago, you know, Minnie, when I left New York ; and where do you think I have been all this while, that I have only got home to-night ?"

"I don't know, I am sure," Miriam said, "that is just what I have been wanting to understand."

"Well, you shall. I have been tossing about on the Chesapeake for the last five days, would

you believe it! When I reached Baltimore, expecting to take the steamboat for Pungoteague the same day, I found to my dismay that the boat had changed the time of her trips, and had already gone the day before! I could not think of waiting there a whole week for her. At last I went down amongst the wharves, and after a great search, found a little oyster-boat that would sail for Accomac on Monday, and take me as a passenger. Even for that I would have to wait three days, but it was the best I could do, so I embarked in her last Monday. And such a time I have had—you would never believe all my experiences, Minnie! What with head winds, and the stupidest of sailors, I began to think I never should get home at all. Certainly not for Christmas, which was what I wanted to do so particularly. However, we *did* get into Pungoteague Creek this evening at last, and I did not wait for daylight to find my way home!”

“What a history!” Miriam exclaimed gayly; “it was too bad, I declare, Laurie; but I am so thankful to have you here at last, that I can’t fully appreciate your hardships by the way!”

“Never mind about them, they haven’t quite used me up,” he answered in the same way. “Not so much but Aunt Comfort’s Christmas dinner to-morrow can restore me. I only

hope nothing will happen to keep father away."

Miriam echoed the wish earnestly ; for strange as it would have seemed a little while ago, their father's presence now was the addition to their happiness most wished for by both. A great change had come to them all, a change which each felt that the other understood, while little was spoken of it.

They sat together thus for a long time, talking over many things that had happened to each in their long separation. Laurence spoke most, he had so much to tell her ; but there seemed to Miriam a different tone in all he said and thought, from what she had been accustomed to in him. She scarcely knew how to define her perception of it, but there was a mingled tenderness and seriousness in voice and speech and manner, which delighted her while it puzzled her, because different from any thing she had seen in him before. But she understood the change by and by.

He had been sitting in silence for a while, with his head leaning upon his hand, and a thoughtful shadow in his eyes. Miriam passed her hand caressingly over the broad white forehead, lifting the waves of curly brown hair that fell upon it, and asked gently,

"What is it, Laurie ? What are you pondering so seriously ?"

"Something I want to tell you, and I scarcely know how," he said. "See here!" and he drew out of his bosom a small morocco book, which Miriam, with a start and flush of delight, recognized as her own little Bible, the same that she had hidden in Laurie's trunk when she packed it for him a year ago.

"Well, Laurie?" she asked breathlessly.

"You remember putting this in my trunk, Miriam," he went on. "Well, I found it, and I laughed at first to think of your hiding it away so shyly, without ever speaking to me about it. But I thought I must read it sometimes at least, for your sake; and so I did, sometimes at night, sometimes Sunday afternoons when I had nothing else I cared to do. I found what you had written in it on this side, Minnie."

Laurence opened the Bible at the first leaf, and showed a text pencilled in Miriam's hand. It was one of her favorites, "*Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*"

"I often remembered it too," he continued, "not always as I should have done, but still it helped me many a time when others were with me, and persuading me to do things that I knew were wrong. But it was a long time before I turned to the other end of the book, and found what was there. It was only a month ago, and I never could bring myself to write to you about it. I cannot tell you now all I felt; but

Minnie, dear sister, truly your prayer has been answered, and God has been good to me even beyond your asking. I know now where you have found faith and strength to bear all that you have borne so bravely and patiently, and to be the blessing to us all that you have been. And I thank God, Miriam, for bringing me out of darkness into such light and joy—but next to Him, darling sister, I bless and thank you.”

There was no mistaking the deep fervor and earnestness of the boy's tone as he spoke these last words, and Miriam, thrilled with such joy and thankfulness, such tender, tearful happiness as she had never known before, could only clasp her arms about her brother, and weep out the fulness of her emotion on his breast. Laurence was scarcely less affected, but he was not ashamed now of the tears which came involuntarily to his eyes—they were no discredit to his manliness.

“This little prayer of yours, Miriam,” he said at last, when they were both more composed, “was, indeed, the first thing which startled me into consciousness of what I was, and what a life I was living without God in the world. What a precious little prayer it is to me now ! Like the Eastern kings, I want to print it in letters of gold. But it is printed on my heart at least, and it will live there when all your pencil-marks have faded out. You see

I have read it, and handled the page so much, that they are wearing indistinct already."

He showed it to her, a blank leaf of the Bible, covered with close pencilled words, and she remembered well the night when her hands had traced them there. Too fearful and ill-assured to speak the words she longed to say, she had written this little prayer, a simple, touching petition that God would say to her brother's heart what she had not the strength to utter. It was bread cast upon the waters, and truly after these many days it had come back to her, very richly, very abundantly!

It seemed almost too much happiness for one evening. That he should not only come alive when she had mourned for him as already dead, but that he should come so blessed, so changed, so purified!

The evening had been crowded so full of excitement and interest, that neither of them had marked how the time passed, and they were startled suddenly by the deep, solemn voice of the old hall-clock tolling one.

"It can't be possible!" Laurence exclaimed. "I did not dream it was midnight yet." But his own watch told the same story, that Christmas Day had already begun.

"Peace on earth, good will to men," Miriam murmured softly. "It will be peace for us this year, Laurie, I am sure."

"Yes," he answered, "I believe it. Not strife and bitterness as it was last year. Oh, Miriam, how often I have remembered that shameful scene, and others like it, and how I have wept over them! If I can ever be forgiven for all my wickedness, surely I must be a better son hereafter."

"You are forgiven now, Laurie," Miriam said gently, as she crossed her hands upon his knee, looking up into his face. "And God will guide you, and help you to become all that you should be. And mother also. Do you know, Laurie, it seems to me as if she were here to-night, as if she were so near us, watching us and blessing us! I never have felt her presence so close to me, and I do believe she will be the angel ministering to us all our lives!"

"God grant it to us!" Laurence exclaimed solemnly. "Then our dead mother will be even better than a living one, and sometimes of late I have almost thought so, Miriam. Like you, I have felt her so near me, although invisible, that it seemed impossible even to think an evil thought in such a pure presence. Our angel mother! How *can* we be thankful enough for her!"

"Father will feel so too, by and by," said Miriam hopefully. "He will be so happy when he sees you again, he can never go back to his old silence and gloom. I wish he were here

now, I am afraid he will not come to-night, it is so late."

"It is such a long drive, and perhaps the boat was delayed some way. Hark! don't you hear a carriage now?" Laurence exclaimed.

Miriam listened for a moment, then hurried to the window, and raised the sash, leaning far out into the starless darkness of the cloudy night. The sound, faint and indistinct at first, seemed to draw nearer, and grow louder, till at last she could distinguish the roll of wheels, and the monotonous clang of hoofs striking upon the hard ground. Neither spoke, as they stood together excited and expectant, until presently a dark outline, darker than the night, was seen moving rapidly amongst the trees. Then Laurence, exclaiming gladly, "It is father, Miriam, surely!" darted eagerly out into the hall to unbar the door, and meet his father as soon as he should reach the house.

Miriam lingered a moment to stir the fire into a blaze, and turn up the lamp which had burned low. Then she ran out to Laurie upon the piazza, and waited silently, but with a beating heart, for the approach of the gig. Another moment and the travel-weary horse stopped before the piazza steps, and a tall dark figure hastily descended. Laurence sprang forward, crying "Father!" with a tremulous eagerness in his voice.

Miriam saw the outstretched arms, and heard the fervent response, "My son! my son! Thank God!" but then a rush of happy tears so blinded her eyes, that while she was conscious of, she could scarcely see the long, close, silent embrace in which father and son held each other. But she felt that from that moment there was no more fear of doubt, or discord, or estrangement. They were united at last.

CHAPTER XV.

AND it was such a merry Christmas at Douglass Farm after all! Notwithstanding every one had been up so late the night before, the whole household was wide awake at daylight Christmas morning. Even Mr. Douglass, who rarely made his appearance before breakfast, had been seen going into the study at least an hour before the first bell rang.

Horace and Mabel and Pussie, with the little black twins at their heels, were romping all over the house, sliding down the banisters at the risk of their necks, by way of saving time in locomotion, and shouting "Merry Christmas" into every body's ears. To-day they had no fear of consequences before their eyes, whatever extravagances they might commit, and they were not slow to improve their opportunities for mischief and fun.

Lily and Geranium Flower were as happy as their little mistress. They were dressed in their Sunday frocks, and Pussie had given Lily

a big yellow bow for a shoulder-knot, that she might be as fine as Geranium with her red one.

Jupe went about, piling up logs on the already roaring fires, till Aunt Comfort declared he would choke the chimneys. But Jupe, to tell the truth, did not know very well what he was doing, for in addition to the joy of Mas' Laurie's return, he had another on his own private account. His master had "given consent" that very morning, that his marriage with Minerva should take place at night, and, in consequence, he was in such a flutter of delight and anticipation, that Aunt Comfort scornfully observed,

"Dat fool of a Jupe, he so full o' his marryin' nonsense, he do' no' whedder he's on his head or his heels. Ef he don' see better wid dem wall-eyes o' his, he'll fin' more 'n he's lookin' for, bimeby!"

But Aunt Comfort's scorn was all an affection, for the marriage was after her own heart, and her own hands were busy enough in preparation for the wedding-feast.

Breakfast was a very different thing to-day from what it used to be. There was such a stream of gay talk, and the children were so happy themselves, they scarcely wondered at the change in their father. It only seemed right and natural that he should be bright and merry too, in the midst of the household joy.

After breakfast was over, he called them all into his study, and there they found out the secret of his early rising. He had cleared away all the books and papers from his desk, and its whole space was covered with beautiful gifts which he had brought from Norfolk for them. Quantities of new books, and toys and games for the little ones; an exquisite inlaid writing-desk with Miriam's name engraved upon the silver centre-plate; and a dozen volumes of the poets, in such beautiful English binding and typography, as an addition to Laurence's own library. There were Milton and Shakspeare, Coleridge and Wordsworth, Tennyson, and the Brownings—all Laurence's royal favorites. He could scarcely find words to express his delighted appreciation of the unexpected gift.

"But, father," he said in surprise, "you surely never found these beautiful editions in Norfolk. I saw them in New York, and coveted them before I came away!"

"Yes, and I had them sent on from New York," Mr. Douglass answered. "I was in Norfolk two days and a half you know; and after I was satisfied with regard to your safety, I had to look around for something to employ so much spare time. So I busied myself in ordering these things. Your desk, Minnie, came from New York too. Norfolk furnished nothing but the playthings and sugar-plums."

"Except all the things for the servants, papa," Miriam said. "You didn't send to New York for those?"

"Oh no, to be sure! And that reminds me that you had better distribute their possessions amongst them at once, because it will soon be time to go to church."

"Then I shall have to wait till we come back to bring out *my* presents," said Laurence. "Wait till you see how scientifically my trunk is packed, Minnie! Your performances in that line were nothing to what I shall show you."

"I dare say," Miriam retorted laughing. "It will be an astonishing performance I imagine, if you were the operator!"

"What did you bring me, Laurie?" Pussie asked, speaking out of the midst of a pile of colored handkerchiefs and bright streaming neck-ribbons with which she was loading herself, to carry into the kitchen, "Papa brought me every thing I wanted, but just one thing: I do wonder if you've brought that!"

"And what may that be, Pussie? I didn't know you had so many particular wants?" Miriam asked.

"Oh, it was only a paint-box," Pussie confessed, blushing. "I wanted to make pictures, and—I wanted to paint Lily and Geranium!"

There was a merry laugh at Pussie's expense, in which Mr. Douglass joined very

heartily; and the twins, the intended subjects of Miss Pussie's experiments, showed all their white teeth in a universal smile of delight. But Laurence declared that he really had brought a box of colors, which she should have, and so the little girl went off well satisfied, to carry her pile of presents into the kitchen. All the rest followed in procession, each carrying something, and even Mr. Douglass himself went with them, holding in his hands a new beaver hat for Uncle Jake, and a wedding-present of a red delaine dress, for Minerva.

And such a rejoicing there was over all the turbans and handkerchiefs, and new dresses for the women, and vests and hats for the men!

"Ole Christmas came back, sùre 'nuff!" Uncle Jake exclaimed with a grunt of satisfaction. "Tousand times obleeged to ye, marster! Nebber seed such a beauty ob a hat on my ole head afore!" and Uncle Jake "tried on" his new beaver, and admired himself with infinite complacency.

Aunt Comfort and Aunt Sabra had each a present suited to their dignity; and every one of the little ones were remembered, even to George Washington and Bell Ellen Victoria. And finally, when all the presentations were over, it was church time.

Laurie rode on his own nonpareil again, who recognized his master with many a "whinny"

of delight, and all the rest went in the carriage with their father. Old St. George's was beautiful with Christmas wreaths and mottoes. Pulpit and chancel, pillars and galleries were decorated with festoons and clusters of shining, red-fruited holly, cedar, and box, and myrtle boughs; and letters, made of the holly-leaves, were arranged in sentences upon the walls, and around the galleries. The bare, empty old church for once looked beautiful and graceful. And Miriam was very glad to see an unusually large congregation already assembled in it.

It was such a happy day to her, her heart was overflowing with love and thankfulness, and all the glad Christmas psalms and anthems seemed but a fit expression for her inward peace and joy. Then the grand old Christmas hymn—how it resounded through the church! Miriam's own sweet voice swelled the strain with unwonted fervor; Laurie joined with her, and even Mr. Douglass' deep tones were heard with the last full chorus—

“ All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace;
Good will henceforth from heaven to men,
Begin, and never cease ! ”

When they reached home again, Miriam was surprised to see a gig standing near the door, its shafts resting upon the ground, and

the horse nowhere in sight; foretelling to her experienced eyes that a visitor had come to spend the day, or at least to dine.

"Papa, who can it be?" she exclaimed. "I did not expect any company to-day—did you?"

"How should I?" he asked banteringly, but Miriam knew by his smile that he was by no means taken by surprise; and "woman-like," as Laurie said, she was very curious to know who this guest of her father's invitation could be.

She hurried into the house, eager to find out, but Laurie sprang before her, for a well-known voice had fallen upon his ear, and he could not delay, even for Miriam, to give his glad greeting to his old friend and dear companion, Roger Dennis.

It was truly Roger, and his uncle Mr. Nottingham stood by his side; and the cordial, hearty welcome which Mr. Douglass gave to both, proved that they were no unexpected or unwished-for guests. He had invited them expressly. The night before, he had met Mr. Nottingham on the wharf at Chirton, and with a sudden remembrance of his injustice to Roger, and a desire to atone for it, he had urged him to come up the next day, and bring his nephew also, to spend it at Douglass Farm.

It was the first time that the two gentlemen

had met since Laurence had been Mr. Nottingham's guest almost a year ago, and he could not now refuse a request so urged and pleaded by Laurence's father. More especially as he himself had heard the rumor of the boy's death, and Roger was still grieving for the supposed loss of his dearest friend.

I need not describe what a happy meeting it was for every body, nor all the bright smiles and merry words which sparkled round the dinner-table that day. I must tell you though, that notwithstanding the loss of time and preparation which the trouble in the house had occasioned, that Christmas dinner was a triumph to the allied culinary forces of Douglass Farm.

Such a roast pig! Uncle Jake had fattened him to that degree that Aunt Sabra declared "he warn't any thing but jes' solid gravy!" Such a Turkey! He had been the pride of the poultry-yard for his vast dimensions and indomitable spirit; and lying now in his savory dressing and rich brown crust garnished with rings of lemon—a perfect mountain of a turkey which completely hid the carver sitting behind him—he looked, if possible, more stately and magnificent than ever. To say nothing of the roast goose, flanked by a ham, such as Accomac, and *only* Accomac can produce—the scalloped oysters—the crisp, snow-white celery—

the sweet potatoes, so large that each one filled a dish alone, and the innumerable other dainties that covered the ample table.

Then the dessert! That was Aunt Comfort's special charge, and every dish had been prepared by her own hands. The snowy trifle, heaped up like a bank of white clouds, and dotted all over with crimson pomegranate seeds, the frozen custard, yellow as gold, with its accompaniment of green-mellon-sweetmeats, carved in all manner of fantastic shapes; the great plum-cake, with Laurence's name showing vividly in letters of pomegranate seeds against the white frosting; the lemon-puddings and mince-pies, the baskets of apples and pomegranates and oranges, the dishes of raisins and almonds—had all been prepared or arranged by Aunt Comfort's skill and taste; and it is impossible to describe the stateliness with which she superintended the transfer of this royal dessert to the dinner-table, and its due and precise arrangement thereon.

Jupe was sobered into forgetfulness of his matrimonial prospects by the solemnity of the ceremony, and for once did not make a single blunder. It was a very grand dinner altogether, but unlike most grand dinners, a very merry and informal one too. Mr. Nottingham complimented Miriam gayly for the grace and

ease with which she presided, and proposed a toast "to the little housekeeper and hostess."

Even Pussie's glass was filled with fresh cold water for this, and every one drank to it heartily; while Miriam's happy face colored and brightened with glad smiles and blushes. Laurence told her afterwards that she had never looked so pretty; and she was indeed beautiful.

After dinner Laurence's New York presents were brought out, to Pussie's great satisfaction, for she had been very anxious to get possession of her box of paints. But Lily and Geranium who were hovering near to catch the first glimpse of that, opened their black eyes and showed all their white teeth in great wonder and delight, as so many prettier things appeared.

There was the dearest little gold pencil in the world, for Pussie, with her own pet-name engraved upon it; and one for Horace too, only larger, and with a gold pen in it besides. Then for Mabel was the prettiest little locket, in the shape of a shell, striped with black and white enamel; and when it was opened, what should it contain but a likeness of Laurie himself! Little May could scarcely bear to let her treasure go out of her hands, even to be looked at and admired by the rest.

Miriam's present was a bracelet made of

her mother's hair, with some of Grandmamma's woven into a tiny little basket, which hung like a locket from the clasp. Laurie knew that nothing else would be so precious to her, and he was more than repaid for his thoughtfulness, by her expression of delight as she recognized the well-known beautiful hair.

And Lily and Geranium—they were not forgotten either. You should have seen the pride and pleasure of the little dark maidens, as Pussie clasped around their necks two splendid, bright-red, mock-coral necklaces! They really thought them the prettiest things of all Mas' Laurie had brought home!

Roger and Laurie enjoyed their ecstasies very much; but Mr. Douglass called the two boys away presently to the hall, where he and Mr. Nottingham were smoking their after-dinner cigar. They had been talking over the whole history of past unhappiness and family trouble, and Mr. Douglass had spoken without reserve to Mr. Nottingham, as he had never spoken to any one else, of the matter. But there could not have been a more interested hearer, for Mr. Nottingham who had loved their mother from childhood, had for her sake an exceeding interest in all that concerned the happiness of her children. And Mr. Douglass gained not only sympathy but wise and delicate

counsel from that long, confidential conversation.

There had been a time when he never would have accepted advice from another with regard to his treatment of his children, and any attempt to offer it would have been haughtily repelled. There had been a time too, when he would never have acknowledged that in any point of his conduct he had been wrong, or unjust, or unfeeling towards them. But he was very much changed now, and Mr. Nottingham found him, to his surprise, not only acknowledging with humility the justice of the censures which he felt obliged to express, but even grateful for them, and willing to be counselled for the future.

They called the two boys at last, after their long discussion, to announce to each of them that they must hold themselves in readiness for another departure early in the New Year.

"Not to New York, Laurence," Mr. Douglass said with a smile, as he saw Laurie's blank expression; "not to Messrs. Grinnell and Howland again, though I do not think you are any the worse for your year with them. But it is time that your college course began, and Roger will be your companion when you start for the University next month."

"Oh, father!" that was all Laurence could say, for the mingled feelings of joy, and peni-

tence, and thankfulness that made such commotion in his heart ; and it was very hard work, boy as he was, to keep down the choking sensation in his throat, and hide the tear that sprang so quickly to his eye.

But Roger was not so much affected, and he could speak out readily and heartily his thanks and pleasure. Mr. Douglass could scarcely believe, as he looked at the handsome, honest face before him, and listened to his frank acknowledgments, that this was the boy against whom he had cherished so violent a prejudice. He felt so differently towards him now. As for Roger himself, he declared, when they were talking it all over, and telling Miriam about it, that he would never call Mr. Douglass a tyrant again.

"I'll take it all back, Laurie," he vowed laughingly. "Every word I used to say against him. He isn't a bit of a tyrant now, whatever he might have been a year ago. He is a perfect brick, that's what he is ! Hurrah for old Charlottesville !"

"Hurrah, too !" Laurie answered as gayly. "But you needn't talk slang before Minnie, Roger. She won't understand you, and she's wanting to know now, I'll venture to say, if a 'perfect brick' doesn't mean something disrespectful."

"You must think Minnie's understanding is

limited," Miriam said, laughing. "But her memory is good at least, and she remembers Mr. Roger's style of paying compliments of old!"

Roger replied with a gay retort, and in the merry talk Miriam forgot for a time the first sad thought which had come to her when they hurried to tell her the joyful news. She had been so lonely without Laurence, she had so longed for his return—and yet now he was going away again so soon! She blamed herself for the selfishness of the feeling, but she still could not help the momentary sadness which it inspired.

However, she concealed it bravely from her brother, and it passed away soon. She could not be sad long on so happy a day, and there were many reasons besides to make this new absence a very different thing from the last. If she was not to have her brother's presence and companionship in the coming year, she would have her father's at least; and a strange thrill of joy stirred her heart as she looked forward to the new delight of his love and sympathy.

In addition to all the other "Merry Christmas," the children had their "taffy-stew" at last. Miriam suggested that it should be put off till another day, as they already had more sugar-plums than could possibly be eaten in a week. But they declared "it wouldn't be

Christmas without the taffy ;" so Miriam told them to do as they pleased about it.

But there was another difficulty in the way besides. Aunt Comfort, Aunt Sabra, Minerva, and all the other most efficient aids were busied in preparations for the wedding, and positively refused to lend any assistance for the taffy-stew. Consequently they had to accept the services of Susan, one of the field hands, who was so slow and deliberate in all her motions, that Pussie, always impulsive and excitable, got into a dozen little frenzies of impatience.

"Susan, *isn't* that done yet? How slow you are—you haven't any smartness at all!" she exclaimed, stamping her little slippered feet half angrily upon the brick floor, as she came for the twentieth time to watch the progress of the boiling. But Susan answered with most imperturbable composure,

"I hain't axed you for none o' yourn, nebber you min', Miss Pussie ;" and proceeded in the same deliberate manner to feed the fire, and stir the frothy mass bubbling and foaming in the kettle.

It was done at last, however, poured into the mould and pans, and set away for the night. And then Pussie's mind felt relieved of the responsibility.

Jupe's wedding was the last event of importance in the day so crowded with events and

interest to the household. Miriam herself tied on the bride's veil and sash, and arranged into graceful folds her full white muslin dress. Jupe was dressed in the most extravagant style of blue coat and white pantaloons, with an astonishing neck-tie that Laurence had brought from New York. And Lily and Geranium, who, for a sudden whim of Laurie's, had been elected bridesmaids at the eleventh hour, were hastily robed in a couple of Mabel's white frocks, with the beloved coral necklaces, and a red bow upon each shoulder, which so effectually confounded the two that even Pussie could not distinguish them.

They did not know whether to be most delighted with the finery, or frightened with the unexpected part they had to perform. But they behaved very well, after all, and Miss Minerva Louisa became Mrs. Jupiter Olympus Douglass in the most approved and dignified style.

After the ceremony they all adjourned to the quarter kitchen, whose two large rooms had been cleared out, and gayly decorated with green boughs for the supper and ball. And all night long the merry sound of the fiddle and "bones," and the unwearied stamping and shuffling of the dancers, gave evidence of the hearty sympathy of the whole company with Jupe's happiness.

Miriam and Laurence stood alone together at last, before the sitting-room fireplace, as they had stood on that well-remembered New Year's Eve. Mr. Nottingham and Roger were gone, Mr. Douglass had retired, and the weary children, worn out with such a day of excitement, were asleep hours ago. The Christmas fire was nothing now but a great bed of white ashes and glowing embers ; but they still lingered beside it in fond and earnest talk.

"Do you remember last New Year's eve?" Laurence asked after a little silence, in which he had been watching the arch of a fairy bridge in the changing coals.

"Yes," Miriam answered softly. "I was thinking of it only this moment."

"And do you remember my saying that I could not see any sign of the millennium you looked for?"

"Yes," she said again.

"I do not say so now," he continued thoughtfully. "I have had so much happiness to-day that it has seemed as if the millennium had already begun at Douglass Farm, and when I go away—to leave you again, Minnie—I shall know that I leave peace and love behind me in my home. You have been tried and proved, Miriam, and for the rest, God will still overcome evil with good for us."

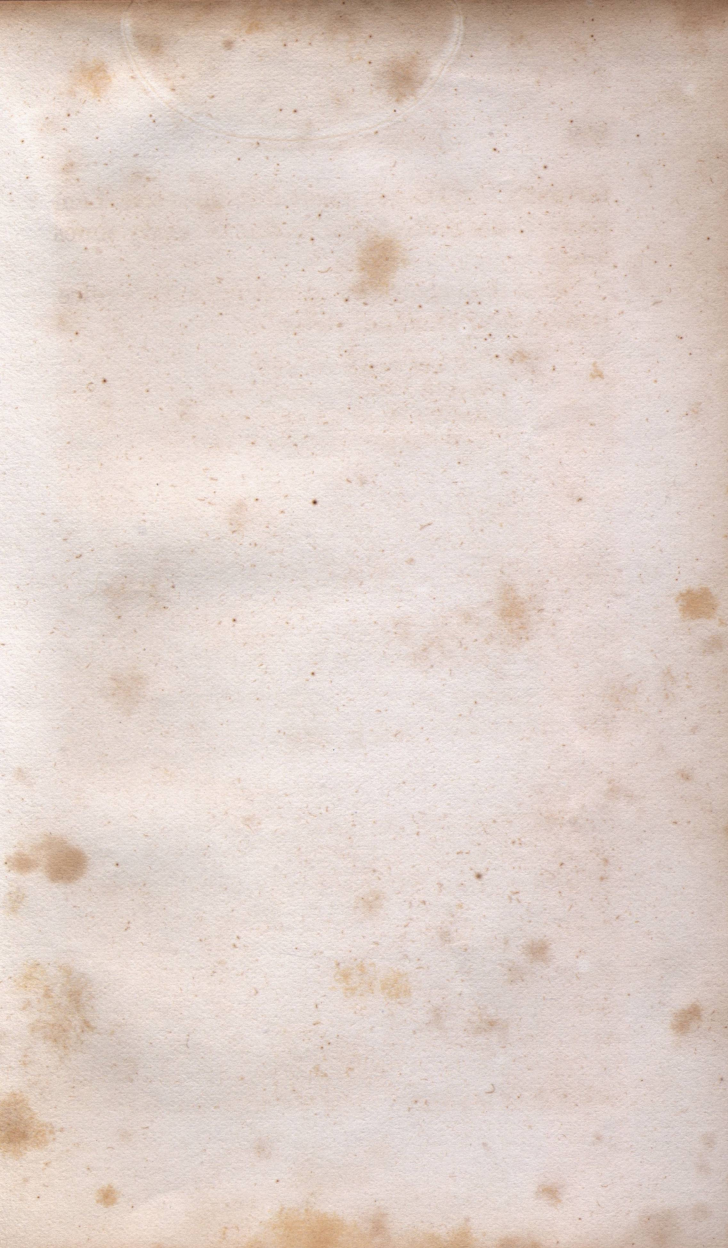
"I know that He will!" Miriam responded

fervently. "Do you remember this verse, Laurie? It has come home to me so many times lately."

And then she repeated softly, Laurie's voice joining in the familiar strain—

"Did ever trouble yet befall,
And He refuse to hear thy call?
And has He not His promise passed,
That thou shalt overcome at last?"

THE END.



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